

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: Project Team

As a key part of the follow-up to the Farmers' Conference, held at ICARDA 4th-8th May 2008, an afternoon-long meeting was held with the team responsible for implementing the KSiR Pilot Project at ICARDA, to review, evaluate and learn from the project and specifically the key KS activity-the International Farmers' Conference.

Why a Farmers' Conference for your research program?

The team explained that participatory plant breeding is a way of working that strongly hinges on collaboration in research between scientists and farmers; a way of blending knowledge, experience, ideas, and practices of both groups to achieve something good and useful for improving agricultural productivity and the lives of people. But there is often a reluctance to work with farmers amidst doubts of the knowledge and experience that farmers may have which can be useful to research programs. There is also little opportunity for wider farmer-to-farmer sharing of knowledge and ideas. The Farmers' Conference was designed to address these issues by providing a platform for farmers to share their knowledge with scientists and other farmers.

Some of the positive aspects of the Farmers' Conference identified by the group were:

- The Farmers' Conference was a unique opportunity for farmers to be the main actors giving presentations (telling their stories)-they had a great chance to share their knowledge, experiences, ideas, practices and skills
- The Farmers' Conference was key in creating a situation in which farmers can discuss with farmers from other countries-from which a lot of new ideas were learned
- The farmers learned a lot about new ways to contribute, collaborate and also share knowledge between themselves.
- Apart from the stories prepared for telling many other stories also came out.
- There were many extra benefits beyond time in the Farmers' Conference-many additional interactions happened



Credit: ICARDA, 2008.

What about the storytelling approach?

The project team had in the pre-conference preparations undertaken a large effort of identification, learning about and evaluation of various knowledge sharing tools which could be used in the Farmers' Conference. The main one chosen was the storytelling approach. Now after the event, I asked the project team what their thoughts on the storytelling approach were.

Dr. Ceccarelli commented that *"Some knowledge is buried deep down and cannot be obtained by simply asking farmers to tell you about their agricultural practices and experiences. You need ways to facilitate and stimulate farmers to think about their experiences and what they know, and then to help them to share this. For example in the conference a farmer that has worked together with ICARDA programs and staff for 10 years told a new story which had knowledge and experience they had not heard from him before. When we asked him why he had not told us that before, he said that he only remembered the story after hearing some of the other stories from farmers."*

Alessandra Galie, PhD student working on the project, expressed her feeling that despite trying to use storytelling as a more appropriate method, some farmers still felt like they needed to make a more formal speech. In discussing this issue, it was felt that there are various perspectives on what a story is. It calls into question what is meant by the term 'story' as it may be viewed differently by different people. It is also interesting to consider how people perceive stories to see how it will be accepted by different groups- farmers, researchers

etc. It was proposed that it would be good next time to define more clearly what is expected from the story to be presented.

Also, while the Farmers' Conference was about farmers sharing their knowledge and experience on agriculture through their stories, some of their stories were about many other things. Dr. Maatougui pointed out that this was not actually a bad thing, as the content of the stories told by the farmers reflects the reality of their situation, their priorities, their needs and their perspective. It helps scientists to learn about related issues in their lives-e.g religion, family etc- which have implications on their work, implications for agriculture. The team all agreed that what was interesting was that some issues that came out of the stories were expected while some were unexpected and new and this will be useful in understanding farmers' situations and needs, planning research and doing dissemination. *"While there may be varying opinions of the value of stories/ storytelling, in the end the stories told are something from their experiences and usually has a take-home message"* contended Dr. Maatougui.

One issue that was raised as we evaluated the way the conference was organised was whether speaking at the podium was really the right way, as some farmers may have felt scared to tell their story at the podium. Dr. Ceccarelli suggested that *"while talking behind the podium may have been intimidating, it actually made the farmers feel proud also to be speaking from the same place as scientists do."*

Added value

The Pilot team described how the Farmers' Conference also created opportunities.

On the one hand it created opportunities for farmers, who not only learned many new things but met people who could help them further. One example told by Dr. Stefania Grando, Project Leader of the KSinR Pilot, was of Rugeia from Souran who after hearing the introduction of a representative from FAO to his Integrated Pest Management work found someone to help her with translation and approached him to discuss how she could improve the situation in her fields through this approach. It also creates opportunities for research as an event like this can facilitate interaction which can lead to the start of useful collaboration. *"It is necessary to find ways to stimulate the scientists to interact with farmers"* commented Dr. Grando.

What are the possible benefits of a knowledge sharing approach such as the Farmers' Conference to our research work?

What many scientists don't realise or appreciate is that many innovations can come from sharing between farmers. At an event like the Farmers' Conference, this kind of sharing can happen and the innovations are then stimulated.

Our research can be improved through learning about what the farmers think are their problems, what they do and what they know. What we want to unlock is *"what do you talk about in your house? What do you discuss when you are making decisions in your agriculture? How do you plan, and implement?"*— and all of this can guide our research planning, experiments, and dissemination.

Dr. Ceccarelli also explained that *"A benefit to our PPB research program in particular was that many of the farmers present at the conference are involved in the ICARDA participatory*

plant breeding program. They are all at different stages so can inform others about what the PPB program and process is like at various stages. It provides perspective and may encourage others to participate."

Another possible impact on research could be that as farmers feel more confident and recognise the value of their own knowledge, experience and skills they may start to demand to be involved in research.

Some of the challenges identified and discussed were:

- There were many languages spoken by the participants and this required a lot of translation. This put a lot of burden on the accompanying person of each group to do translation. It also meant that there were gaps in the flow of the presentations while waiting for translation.
- Another issue that became apparent was the difficulty in how to translate certain terminology between various languages
- One limitation to the Farmers' Conference was that they would have liked to see more scientists there. Because the aim is/was to show scientists how much the farmers know and thus justifying the credibility of participatory research.
- Time was also a limiting factor. The Farmers' Conference had a lot of energy and people wanted to talk and discuss a lot but the time had to be managed to get through the whole program.

Some key lessons learned from the process were:

- It is necessary to build in some flexibility into your approach/activity (such as Farmers' Conference) so as to allow for spontaneous sharing activities to take place. At the Farmers' Conference a Food and Seed Fair spontaneously took place on one of the days and this was a very positive element as it really helped to stimulate conversation and learning.
- It is about creating a conducive environment in which people feel comfortable to share
- Need to find new ways to attract the scientists to become involved in such an event

Finally when asked whether this particular knowledge sharing approach-the Farmers' Conference and its various sharing activities- could be used or useful in other research programs, the Project team was very positive. *"Since the main concept of the approach is about bringing together end users of research to share their knowledge with researchers and others-it can be used in any research program that is or wants to make use of collaboration with these key stakeholders"* responded Dr. Grando.

Researchers discussing with female farmer during farmer conference.
Credit: ICARDA, 2008.



For more information: www.ks-cgiar.org