

Putting farmers first: reshaping agricultural research in West Africa

How agricultural research is funded, organised, controlled and practised can have a huge impact on small-scale producers in the global South. In many countries, such research is driven by external funds, priorities and technological fixes, such as hybrid seeds, which can erode crop diversity. But food producers across the world are beginning to raise their voices to ensure that agricultural research better meets their needs and priorities. A series of farmer assessments and citizens' juries in West Africa has helped farmers assess existing approaches and articulate recommendations for policy and practice to achieve their own vision of agricultural research. In 2012, a high-level policy dialogue between farmers and the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa hopes to take this discussion to the next level and develop a shared agenda that can serve development and the public good.

Policy pointers

- **Farmers and other citizens** need inclusive and safe spaces to discuss how to build an agrifood research system that is democratic and accountable to wider society, and to participate in setting the policy for investments in agricultural research that affect them.
- **Citizens' juries enable** small-scale producers to assess expert knowledge and articulate strategic research priorities and policy recommendations that meet their needs.
- **Engaging with global** institutions is critical to creating a shared agenda for agricultural research for development. The upcoming policy dialogue in Ghana marks a major step in this direction for West Africa.

Research failings

The choices available to food producers and consumers, and the environments in which they live and work, are partly shaped by publicly funded research. For a long time, agricultural research has been seen as the domain of scientific experts, with farmers at the receiving end of research outputs, such as new crop varieties or certification standards. If a variety or a policy fails, farmers are often blamed for their 'ignorance' and 'inability to farm correctly'. Rarely is the strength or relevance of the research itself questioned.

Yet it is increasingly clear that much publicly funded research does not meet the needs or priorities of today's farmers, particularly of those working on a small scale (less than one hectare) in low- and middle-income countries.

In West Africa, the agricultural research system relies heavily on external funding. For more than 20 years, agricultural research by organisations such as the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) in Mali and national research systems across the region have produced new varieties

of crops, such as sorghum, millet and groundnuts, based on selections made in the research station. But such genetically improved varieties tend to be hybrids which, unlike traditional varieties, cannot be resown year on year. They also often require additions of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, increasing farmers' dependence on purchasing inputs and their risk of debt.

The legal context can also undermine local livelihoods and environments. For example, certification laws developed for the Economic Community of West African States dictate that only improved, certified seeds can be sold. Certification is expensive and difficult for peasant farmers, whose self-reliance and resilience depends on being able to store, breed and exchange or sell their own seeds and animal breeds. The result is a gradual decline in traditional varieties and the genetic diversity they represent.

Then there is the problem of communication. Research findings are often documented in a language that most producers do not understand. Or such findings are simply kept out of reach — research results on livestock rearing and fishing in particular are not sufficiently disseminated among herders, fisherfolk and others.

Scientific innovations must build on the knowledge and priorities of farmers

‘Democratising’ research

In large part, the disconnect between research and farmers derives from a lack of participation. Farmers and other producers are rarely involved in drawing up strategic plans for agricultural research. This is especially true of women, even though they are involved in all aspects of food production — including cultivation, selection and conservation of seeds — and have a deeper understanding of culinary and nutritional quality of different seed varieties than men.

Farmers may be asked to help test and replicate improved seeds, but they are rarely given the opportunity to explain what improvements they need to the traditional varieties that they prefer and that are adapted to their diverse growing conditions.

There is a strong need to ‘democratise’ the governance of food and agricultural research — to take a fair and inclusive approach that creates safe spaces for farmers and other citizens, both men and women, to participate in setting research plans and policies.

Such an approach recognises that technological fixes are not enough and sees science as part of a bottom-up, participatory development process in which citizens take centre stage. Instead of being passive beneficiaries of ‘trickle down’ development or technology transfer, citizens become knowledgeable and active actors, deeply involved in both the ‘upstream’ choice and design of scientific innovations, as well as their ‘downstream’ implementation, spread and regulation.

This is not to say that policy and scientific innovations cannot benefit both the rural poor and the environment. But to do so, such innovations must engage with and build on the perspectives, knowledge and priorities of farmers and other citizens, and respond to their diverse local realities and needs. And that means putting previously marginalised farmers and citizens at the heart of debate on the choices to be made about food and agricultural research.

Farmers’ vision in Mali

The past four years have seen important gains across the world in democratising agricultural research in this way. Through an international action-research initiative known as ‘Democratising the Governance of Food Systems’, different participatory methods and institutional innovations are being used to create inclusive, democratic and safe spaces for citizens to get involved in research policymaking and agenda setting in four regions: West Africa, South Asia, West Asia and the Andean region in Latin America.¹

In West Africa, the initiative has focused on citizen deliberations in Mali; these have been coordinated by a steering group, established in 2008 and representing 15 organisations across government, academia, producer organisations, small-scale private sector, civil society and media. The group began by working with IIED and local partners to facilitate a farmers’ assessment of public research on plant breeding and agrobiodiversity management in Mali in 2009. Farmers, both men and women, assessed the work of ICRISAT and national research programmes using their own criteria for evaluation and according to their own priorities. They then made a series of recommendations centred on



The citizens’ juries in Mali were an opportunity for small-scale producers and consumers to make recommendations on how food and agricultural research should be governed.

Table. Recommendations from citizens' juries in Mali

Models of agricultural production	<p>Involve farmers in every stage of creating and selecting crop varieties and focus research on improving the productivity of local varieties through, for example, growing practices, land use and soil fertility management.</p> <p>Find strategies to promote the use, exchange, and storage of local seeds; avoid hybrid seeds and genetically modified organisms.</p> <p>Generate knowledge and technologies to support sustainable agriculture, including tools and machines adapted to small-scale farming; use of natural mineral resources and compost; integrated pest management; and mixed cropping.</p>
Land tenure and property rights	<p>Provide producers with accurate information about land registration procedures.</p> <p>Develop research into how to allocate land titles to women</p>
Farmers and markets	<p>Take into account local products such as datou, soumbala and dried fish in research protocols and topics, and their potential to replace imported condiments like stock cubes.</p> <p>Develop mechanisms to help protect the local market and local produce from unfair competition from imported products.</p> <p>Develop strategies to facilitate sales of local products on markets.</p>
Research governance	<p>Reconstruct agricultural policy to give farmers a central role in defining it.</p> <p>Directly involve producers, users and consumers (both women and men) in controlling, designing, conducting and monitoring research activities.</p> <p>Organise citizens' juries, or conferences, to define the overarching policies and strategic priorities for food and agricultural research.</p> <p>Identify and investigate mechanisms that enable the state to provide more funding to research and reduce dependency on external sources.</p> <p>Increase efforts to circulate and disseminate the results of participatory research, especially in local languages.</p> <p>Build on and disseminate farmers' agro-ecological knowledge and innovations (on seeds, fertilisation, etc.)</p>

ensuring that research is a service to farmers. These included suggestions such as allowing farmers to set research objectives and supporting them to conserve their own varieties of seeds and animal breeds.²

The farmers' assessment was followed, in 2010, by two six-day-long 'citizens' juries', which allowed farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, forest dwellers and food processors to hear specialist witnesses provide evidence and arguments on: the priorities for knowledge and research that serve small-scale producers; and the ways in which the governance of food and agricultural research should be democratised.

Each jury was made up of 40–45 small-scale producers or consumers — both men and women — from Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal. The two sessions saw 15 specialist witnesses from Europe and West Africa give evidence. And in both cases, the jurors assessed this evidence in the light of their own farming knowledge, priorities and aspirations, from which they devised a series of recommendations for achieving their own vision of the governance and direction of food and agricultural research.

Nearly 100 individual recommendations emerged from the citizens' juries, covering issues such as models

of agricultural production, land tenure and property rights, and food and agriculture markets, as well as issues of research funding, organisation, practice and governance (see Table, above).³

From rhetoric to reality

These recommendations articulate the vision and priorities of the citizens' juries for agricultural research. But turning them from rhetoric into reality requires the buy-in of high-level decision makers — within governments, donor agencies and research organisations alike.

In West Africa, a key player in setting the agenda for agricultural research for development is the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), which controls a total budget of nearly US\$400 million and, by the end of 2009, had financed projects in the agricultural sector worth more than US\$83 million in 14 African countries.⁴

In February, 2012, the team behind the citizens' juries in Mali is taking the democratisation of agricultural research to the next stage in a high-level policy dialogue between small-scale farmers and food processors (from Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger

Towards a shared agenda?

From 1 to 3 February, 2012, IIED and African partners will host a high-level policy dialogue between farmers and AGRA. The event, which will be held in Accra, Ghana, aims to create a safe space for all participants to share their perspectives and priorities on the directions and governance of agricultural research for development and identify areas of agreement and difference on what is needed in Africa to alleviate poverty and eradicate hunger.

Both farmers and AGRA will present their vision for agricultural research in Africa and will then discuss a select number of specific issues, including:

- priorities for plant breeding and seed selection;
- options for managing soil fertility;
- priorities for developing markets;
- ways of governing, organising, funding and practising research; and
- the types of policies needed to transform Africa's agriculture, including tenure, subsidies and investment.

and Senegal) and AGRA senior scientists, managers, partners and donors (see Towards a shared agenda?). The three-day event will be chaired by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier de Schutter, and will also be attended by representatives of farming communities in Asia, East Africa and Latin America. A video link with London will allow participation by UK donors and members of parliament.

The dialogue, which includes two days of deliberation on key areas of agreement and divergence between participants' priorities, will help develop a shared future research agenda for farmers and AGRA in

West Africa. It also hopes to establish a set of recommendations on policy and practice for different actors — including African governments, international organisations, donors, farmer organisations and AGRA — that can transform food and agricultural research to serve development and the public good.

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Notes

■ ¹ See www.excludedvoices.org. ■ ² For a full report of the farmers' assessment see: BEDE. 2009. *Les Variétés Améliorées des Stations de Recherche ne sont pas Toujours les Meilleures*. BEDE, Montpellier. (In French) ■ ³ For the full list of recommendations made by citizens' juries in Mali see www.excludedvoices.org/democratising-agricultural-research-food-sovereignty-west-africa. ■ ⁴ See www.agra-alliance.org/section/about.