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# Institutionalising participation in Eastern Africa research institutes

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## Introduction

The African Highlands Initiative (AHI) was started in 1995 to address complex livelihoods and integrated natural resources management (INRM) issues. Endorsed by the directors of national agricultural research institutions (NARIs) institutions, AHI set out to develop participatory research methodologies (PRMs) and integrated, systems approaches as 'new' ways of implementing research and development (R&D) processes. This work aims to empower smallholder farmers, foster innovative development, and positively influence practices used by R&D organisations. The NARIs of Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Madagascar, together with agricultural extension personnel and a number of local NGOs, work collaboratively under the AHI umbrella at benchmark sites that exhibit environmental degradation and high poverty levels.

Given the dearth of experience and conceptual development in participatory methods, AHI has invested in building the competencies of researchers and others through training courses, mentoring, exchange visits, peer review, applying participatory M&E, and using reflection sessions. However, even after four to five years of exposure some researchers still view PRMs with scepticism. On the other hand there are promising results in AHI pilot areas where researchers' work with farmer research groups has resulted in quick uptake of multiple technologies. Thus, there are 'islands' where PRM

has been largely accepted, used, and appreciated.

Although the AHI pilot teams were convinced of the value of PRM, they felt that if their institutions did not support PRM, then it would not survive and spread. Therefore, AHI decided to support the documentation and analysis of key lessons from their past work using PRM, and facilitate the establishment of strategies for the institutionalisation of a participatory INRM approach (AHI, 2002). AHI now has a mandate from ASARECA<sup>1</sup> to assist NARIs in this respect, and work started with two NARIs in 2001.

This article begins by examining some of the barriers to institutionalisation identified during AHI's work. It then describes the learning approach used to introduce PRMs to NARIs. Lessons learnt from this process are drawn out, and the strategies being developed to institutionalise PRM in East African NARIs are then discussed. The article ends by outlining some of the challenges still faced in institutionalising PRM.

## Barriers to institutionalising PRM

Finding ways to get public institutions to embrace innovation – specifically the use of participatory approaches – is a major challenge.

Institutions of higher learning in the North and South, who are responsible for training researchers joining the African NARS, have not adequately trained professionals in

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PRMs. They tend to encourage graduates to believe they have ‘elite’ status, which makes it difficult for them to accept the idea of working in partnership with farmers, where a more equal status needs to underpin the work and greater respect given to local knowledge and practical experience. A ‘learning culture’ has not been fostered in NARIs and other research institutions, largely because they are seen as sources of ‘expertise’ and therefore not in need of a system for continuous learning.

There are also deeply rooted attitudinal biases in favour of the ‘hard sciences’ within NARIs and other research institutions. Biophysical scientists dominate, and few sociologists, anthropologists, and rural development specialists are hired. Nor do needed skills such as facilitation, negotiation, team leadership, and managing partnerships feature in training offered. Little attention is paid to the ‘human’ and cultural factors related to the internalisation and application of PRM, e.g. managing researcher-farmer power relations, handling researchers’ professional identity, nor to fostering a learning culture to encourage incorporation of PRM into the research process.

Agricultural researchers, and their organisations, generally regard themselves as being accountable for generating ‘hard’ technologies and passing these on to farmers via agricultural extension or development agents. In this process, researchers do not take direct responsibility for non-adoption, nor do they make deliberate efforts to ensure that technologies lead to concrete benefits. In most research organisations, professional rewards and advancement are based on crop variety development and scientific papers. There is no reward for using PRM, incorporating important social and institutional dimensions into one’s work, and being more responsive to clients’ priorities and needs.

Scepticism concerning the scientific rigour of PRM and limited expertise that negatively affects PRM quality also impede use. Data and case studies that can convince research managers that PRM is necessary to make a contribution are hard to come by, partly due to the fact that it is difficult to quantify the benefits of PRM in handling social aspects of technology adoption.

### Box 1: Developing a learning approach to PRMs

- A series of regional training courses on PRM followed by site training were held in 1998.
- A regional stakeholders’ workshop in 1999 laid the basis for a ‘learning’ culture by establishing a shared vision of research needs to ensure that farmers and farmers’ organisations are successful, an operational plan, associated methods, and an M&E system to monitor change.
- A series of M&E and participatory methodology training and reflection sessions, involving NARI scientists and partners, were held at the benchmark sites. These emphasised group and individual experiential learning (systematic self-reflection, observation, and feedback on the implementation of PRM), interdisciplinary and integrated team work, and multi-institutional partnerships (important components of INRM).
- The site-level outcomes were processed and shared back to and among sites.
- An amalgamated cross-site analysis was made where key learning points were highlighted and disseminated.
- Repeated visits were made to reflect on subsequent stages of implementation of PRM and INRM components.
- Reflection sessions and a SWOT analysis were held after a three-year period. The need for mentoring was recognised and a regional team was established to mentor site teams.

To begin to overcome these barriers, AHI has developed a learning approach to the use of PRM.

### Evolution of the learning approach

NARI staff involved in AHI have been trained and mentored in PRM using an iterative process over a three-year period (1999–2002). Initially, implementers of AHI used regional training and one-off workshops on PRM to enhance the capacity of individuals and teams. However, these did not result in the desired level of change in practice. Therefore, AHI started complementing them with team or site workshops with facilitated reflection sessions. Later *in situ* mentoring was added, to increase individual, group, and organisational learning (Box 1).

The AHI learning approach thus involves facilitated reflection by practitioners on ‘what went well’, ‘what did not go well’, ‘why’, and ‘what should be done to improve’. Performance assessment frameworks are now being created to guide this reflection (see next section).

Some key insights resulting from this process, which have helped to shape field practice and future work, include:

- Team learning in the field complements individual learning. Shared field experiences and information led to the discovery of new approaches and broadened the perspectives of researchers. For example, biophysical scientists at KARI (the Kenyan NARI) recognised the need to learn more about the social and cultural dimensions of the farming community.

Learning with farmers at a benchmark site, Ginchi, Ethiopia



Photo: Tifahun Amede

They wanted social science research to be incorporated into their activities.

- Practical field sessions with farmers led to researchers 'learning-by-doing'. Researchers gained better insights into farm system management and how research could enhance impact. In Lushoto, Tanzania, for example, an experiment on farmyard manure with Mjingu Phosphate Rock (MPR) was changed significantly from the original researcher design after farmer input. Since the Lushoto farmers did not have enough manure, the design was modified to use MPR and tughutu, a local shrub used by farmers to enhance their soil fertility. This interaction resulted in more relevant research and increased the researchers' motivation to use these methods.
- Interdisciplinarity reduced tensions and competition between professionals. In conventional practice, specific disciplines operate fairly autonomously given the planning, funding, and reductionist approaches within most institutions. With the new PRM methods, reflection sessions and teamwork increased the frequency of consultations and joint field activities involving scientists and collaborating partners. For example, demonstrations on the use of green manure to improve soil fertility and crop yield required frequent consultations between agronomists, an agricultural economist, a soil scientist, and a livestock nutritionist, who worked for various R&D organisations in the area.
- Shared vision led to expanded roles and responsibilities. At the organisational level, the visioning exercise carried out in 1999 sharpened the perspective of the different disciplines and institutions involved, clarifying more precisely what they needed to do, and how they might relate to each other differently. For example, farmers would change from the role of recipients to partners in development; and researchers (and other service/support organisations) would change from being suppliers to facilitators of farmer- and community-led innovations.

#### Box 2: Guiding principles and values for effective research

- Inclusiveness: consider choice of farmers & give equal opportunity
- Differentiate problems for various social strata
- Understand farmers' situations and value their knowledge
- Build genuine partnerships and facilitate dialogue with farmers and other stakeholders
- Build farmers' capacities to manage their own affairs through participation + self reliance
- Research should be problem driven and demand oriented
- Access to technologies: create flexibility and options
- Joint ownership: role clarification, transparency, build confidence
- Trust in farmers' potentials and their capabilities
- Recognise that farmers are their own experts in their situation
- Experiential learning for both researchers and farmers
- Continuous improvement: systematic monitoring of progress and reflection on approach

*Adapted from EARO, DRD and AHI Regional Workshops held in 2001/02*

- A more supportive organisational environment is needed to enhance adoption of PRM. Although learning and developing PRMs as individuals and teams has been valuable, the teams also identified a need for institutional support to make these methods standard practice. Therefore, in addition to building capacity through mentoring and the creation of 'working models' of PRM in action, AHI has begun to facilitate self-managed institutional change processes. These will encourage organisations to search for ways to provide a more supportive environment for the application of PRM.

#### Developing self-managed institutional change processes

In 2001/2, AHI began working with the Ethiopian Agricultural Research Organisation (EARO) and the Department for Research and Development (DRD) in Tanzania to promote institutional change processes. An important principle is that these should be self-managed but guided by facilitation, so that NARIs understand and own the process and innovation. The process is intended to assist NARI researchers and managers in 'holding up the mirror' so as to identify where change is needed to conduct more effective research, which includes quality use of PRM.

At a series of workshops, participants revisited their shared vision and developed a set of guiding principles (see Box 2) and success factors for effective R&D (Box 3). Participants also identified a performance assessment framework. This has components for each major player (farmers, farmer organisations, researchers, research managers, policy makers, extension agents, and NGOs) and

### Box 3: Success factors for managing effective R&D processes

- linkages and partnerships among stakeholders
- farmer participation and commitment
- community facilitation of R&D process
- local organisational capacity
- commitment and capacity of research teams
- basket of technical options and innovations
- learning through process monitoring and documentation
- farmer learning through sharing and exposure
- supportive research management system
- farmer experimentation
- market orientation
- multi-disciplinary and systems approach
- scaling up strategy
- supportive policies
- designing and operationalising research

Source: the EARO and DRD workshops on Assessing Participatory Research, 2001/02

for each of these actors there are a number of areas (performance areas) that they must focus on if they are to be successful. Associated with these are a set of indicators which show whether or not good practice is being achieved.

The performance assessment frameworks are still under construction as we continue to test them in the field, and identify success factors and elements, gaps, and challenges. Findings are shared with managers in order to develop more effective ways of supporting research from the practitioner's, manager's and organisation's perspectives.

Next steps include:

- setting up a platform for learning across research 'islands' and to gather up best practice;
- setting up a platform or mechanisms for managers to be more in touch with researchers' field activities; and
- setting up committees to review organisational norms, rules, etc. on promotions, planning, and M&E so they better reflect the performance criteria agreed upon (for example, team work is needed but currently not rewarded).

For reasons of space, this is a simplified version of the process. Further details are given in Stroud and Hagmann (forthcoming).

### Key challenges for the future

Norms and values of participatory innovation and learning (participatory research, integrated team work, partnerships, participatory technology development, farmer innovations) may be met with scepticism, fear, and sabotage by

### Key success factors for effective R&D, EARO workshop

Photo: Jürgen Hagmann



researchers and their organisations. Initiators of change must confront these challenges and treat institutional change as a process that needs to be managed at the levels of attitudes, behaviour, and practice.

There is now the potential for researchers to build a learning culture that can assist in 'unblocking' researchers and their institutions from current learning barriers and foster more open, creative, and responsive organisations. Key factors in managing the change process are:

- building a mutual understanding of new concepts
- handling fear, anxiety, and vulnerability
- finding definitive ways that prove that new methods and tools work
- dealing with the 'results gaps'
- handling expectations from within and without
- dealing with the non-believers (Stroud, 2003)

The vision is to improve leadership and facilitation skills, reward champions of change, give recognition for the use of innovative results, and create an unthreatening environment for dialogue about 'poor' results. These are all critical supporting elements that enable learning teams and their organisations to sustain the momentum for change (Stroud, 2003).

It is extremely important to address the issue of quality of science and participation, setting up ways to monitor / measure the quality of participation once it is defined. For instance, assessing who participates – and to what degree – in participatory learning is a dimension that needs systematic treatment. Otherwise, PRM will never be accepted.

It is also necessary to identify indicators of change so that one can recognise progress. For example, a researcher's admission that s/he is ignorant of farmers' indigenous knowledge is an important change in cognitive orientation. Similarly, if a breeder recognises the need to learn about social dimensions of the community, and integrates this step into his/her research protocol, allocating resources for facilitation, this is an important indicator of constructive change. AHI has seen some indications such as these in the pilot teams, but wishes to see them spread more widely within NARIs.

A further challenge is to change reward structures. Currently, rigid mind sets and organisational norms are perpetuated through reward systems that only recognise scientific outputs such as crop varieties and management technologies, and scientific papers. Research results obtained through 'soft sciences' (anthropology and sociology) and PRM, which result in qualitative changes (empow-

erment, farmer, and institutional innovation), are not recognised and rewarded, and limited expertise is available to bring these approaches into the mainstream. Without capacity building and reformed reward structures, PRM is unlikely to be institutionalised. This is currently where AHI sees its agenda – in fostering institutional change to support these new practices.

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Stroud, A. and Hagmann J (forthcoming) 'Self-management of institutional change by national agricultural research organisations towards more effective research for sustainable development.' Contact the authors for further details.