



Lessons learned

Researchers and farmers jointly plan activities in Ruvu village, Tanzania
Photo: Sokoine University of Agriculture / F. Rwehumbiza

Making PAR work for vulnerable communities

Participatory action research (PAR) is an approach ideally suited to the CCAA program's dual research and capacity building mandate. It involves researchers and research users in a shared process of 'learning by doing'. When practised effectively, PAR is a powerful tool that links those most at risk of climate change with researchers and policymakers, and helps them develop the evidence needed to inform sound adaptation plans and policies.

CCAA's mentoring and training has produced valuable insights into strengths and weaknesses of partners' application of the approach. The review of first proposals to the CCAA program back in 2007 revealed a lack of researcher experience in working with PAR methods. While participatory methodologies are not entirely new to the African research community, their use in exploring climate change adaptation is still in its infancy. Consequently, the program devoted additional resources to strengthening PAR. In 2007–08 it approved funding for a project led by the Center for International Forestry Research to provide additional

Lessons to date

- ▶ PAR has proven an effective tool for engaging stakeholders
- ▶ Building PAR skills is a long-term process and needs to start early in the project cycle
- ▶ The PAR approach lends itself to research leadership by atypical 'researchers'
- ▶ There are clear signs in some projects that decision-makers see PAR findings as being relevant to policy.

training and mentoring to research partners, and this year a PAR specialist joined the CCAA team to increase its expertise in this field.

The first cohort of CCAA research partners and a number of program staff took part in two PAR capacity development workshops this year: in Ethiopia in September 2008 for anglophone teams, and in Benin in October 2008 for francophone teams.



Youths take part in learning centre activities at a study site in Makoni district, Zimbabwe

Photo: University of Zimbabwe/P. Mapfumo

After reviewing the different stages of the PAR cycle, and the need for impact assessment and baseline data, project teams were asked to prepare PAR protocols and to present their mentoring needs so that more in-depth support can be given.

Observations and questions posed at the workshops revealed that many had struggled with PAR components of their projects. Some teams had had limited experience with the approach, and were developing data-heavy projects that were less action-oriented. This pointed to a need for greater clarity on the role and practice of PAR in CCAA-supported research at earlier stages, with training support provided in the project development process. PAR is best built into project design. These lessons are being applied to the new round of CCAA projects on urban vulnerability.

The experience of the NGO *Initiatives pour un développement intégré durable* (IDID-ONG) in leading research to inform and involve rural producers in Benin has also shown that PAR can be successfully led by organizations that are not traditional research institutions. IDID-ONG and its partners are

experienced in rural extension. They have brought on board research centres or other expert organizations for specific tasks, such as to conduct surveys on local strategies for coping with climate variability. The fact that IDID-ONG had strong experience in working with at-risk groups and other stakeholders has allowed them to lead the overall process, while commissioning research expertise as needed.

Research teams demonstrated real progress this year in their application of PAR. Each project uses different approaches to engaging with stakeholders, but most use some form of platform to involve those affected by the research problem in sequential reflection, and in testing options of interest.

Some projects build on existing multi-stakeholder platforms. In South Africa's Western Cape, researchers developing options to address competing demands on scarce water engage a range of water users through the Berg River Catchment Management Authority. In Madagascar, researchers have held meetings under the aegis of the National Adaptation Programme of Action committee. And in West Africa, a team aiming to strengthen adaptive policies in the fisheries sector has joined with an existing fisheries commission to launch a new subregional advisory platform on fisheries policy. Other projects are creating new platforms, such as commune-level early warning committees established in Benin, and monitoring and evaluation committees in a Burkina Faso-based project exploring rural-urban cooperation in managing risk to water resources. Some platforms work more at local level, others at municipal, national, or regional levels, while a few work simultaneously at multiple levels and create interactions between them.

The value of the PAR approach is demonstrated in projects where the involvement of communities and officials in shared learning is serving national policy processes, as in Benin and Madagascar, and where local and district plans are being better informed.