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Lessons for out-scaling and up-scaling from Participatory research approaches

Background

A wide range of participatory research approaches were used during DFID's ten-year Renewable Natural Resources Research Strategy (RNRRS) Programme. However, it should be remembered that participatory research is challenging. And, while they have a lot to offer, participatory methods should not be used simply because they are currently a popular concept—as they will not always be the best approach.

Giving stakeholders control of the work needed to adapt and apply research findings is, however, more likely to result in successful uptake—as it allows them to draw on local experience and preferences to adapt new knowledge to their needs. So although participation may not always be appropriate in some aspects of research, it may work quite well in processes for out-scaling or up-scaling research findings.

Key points

- Participation takes many forms.
- Stakeholder participation does not mean that stakeholder groups are necessarily equitably represented.
- Only use a participatory approach if it is the best way to achieve goals to out-scale or up-scale.
- Participatory approaches can be very challenging to manage.
- Existing set-ups may be channels for out-scaling research findings but may need strengthening.
- Unless attitudes change and new arrangements are made it will be difficult for people to use new knowledge and research findings.
- Participatory approaches still have to be explored.

Lessons learned

Participation takes many forms. Participation can range from arrangements which only pay lip-service to participation to situations where people get together to make changes independently of external influences (Box 5.1). What they are participating in—and who is driving the process—also varies.

In the RNRRS, participatory approaches worked quite well when the aim was to gain a deeper understanding of people's needs and tailor research to meet those needs. In plant breeding, getting more farmers to participate at the 'segregating generations' stage of plant breeding, for example, was more effective in developing appropriate varieties than "less collaborative research" (see

Box 5.1

Different forms and degrees of participation¹⁷

- *Manipulative participation (co-option)* Community participation is simply pretence; representatives on official boards are not elected and have no power.
- *Passive participation (compliance)* Communities 'participate' by being told what has been decided; the information belongs to external professionals only.
- *Participation by consultation* Communities participate by being consulted or by answering questions. Problems are defined by external agents.
- *Participation for material incentives* Communities participate by contributing resources such as labour, in return for material incentives (e.g. food, cash).
- *Functional participation (cooperation)* Community participation is seen by external agencies as a means to achieve project goals.
- *Interactive participation (co-learning)* People participate in joint analysis, development of action plans and by forming or strengthening local institutions.
- *Self-mobilisation (collective action)* People participate by taking initiatives (independently of external institutions) to change systems.

projects R8071 and R8099 Participatory plant breeding). Similarly, researchers succeeded in empowering women who owned small livestock by working with them in a participatory manner (R7164 Indigenous knowledge, participatory appraisal and animal health information systems).

However, the most successful participatory approaches were those used in the management of natural resources (forests, fisheries, land and water) where the aim was to help communities learn to express their needs and do something about them. Participants learned to collect, analyse and share information, and so became the driving force in making decisions in adaptive learning projects in fisheries (R7335, R8292)¹⁸, farmer field schools (R7986)¹⁹ and forest user groups (R6918)²⁰.

Participation does not mean that stakeholder groups are necessarily equitably represented. People who do not have resources (time, land, cash, credit and labour) or skills (reading, writing, numeracy) often cannot participate fully, or even at all. Those most likely to fall into this category include women, older

¹⁷ Catley, A and Leyland, T. 2001. 'Community participation and the delivery of veterinary services in Africa'. Preventive Veterinary Medicine, 49, 95-113.

¹⁸ Co-management: a synthesis of the lessons learned from the DFID Fisheries Management Science Programme.

¹⁹ Livestock farmer field schools - guidelines for facilitation and technical manual.

²⁰ Participatory action and learning: a field worker's guidebook for supporting community forest management planning. R6918.

people, minorities, and the very poor. Power relationships in communities may mean that elites dominate or that only certain people are chosen as representatives. Ways of overcoming barriers to truly representative participation still need to be found (Box 5.2).

Box 5.2

Overcoming barriers to participation, Self Help Groups

Natural Resources Systems Programme projects established Self Help Groups so that the poorest of the poor could get small loans. This meant that even the very poor could participate in the research projects, which they would have been unable to do otherwise because it is very difficult for them to get credit. The Self Help Groups have proved so successful that they are continuing to function well beyond the life of the project.

Only use a participatory approach if it will help meet goals to out-scale or up-scale. It seems obvious to state this, but it is counter-productive to use a participatory approach, or any other approach for that matter, unless it is expected to be the best approach in the particular circumstances. In most cases it seems likely that some form of participation is going to be an essential part of meeting goals to out-scale or up-scale research findings. To date, most participation has been at the grass-roots level. Determining who should participate and how will probably show that participation at all levels will be needed. Nevertheless, the feasibility of a participatory approach should still be examined at the outset. There are considerable hurdles to be overcome in getting full and representative participation.

How the goal itself is decided, whether it is externally set or whether groups take the initiative themselves, is also an issue to be considered.

Participatory approaches can be very challenging to manage. Researchers found that managing the expectations of those who they invited to participate in projects could be challenging. Participants sometimes expected that the ideas they put forward would be put into practice, even though some were technically unworkable and others too costly²¹.

But, participatory approaches are likely to help understand which research findings people will find acceptable when put into practice and why. These approaches also provide opportunities to (i) investigate why any particular piece of new knowledge does not appear to be working when applied, (ii) learn why it is not working, and (iii) adapt it so that it works better. This suggests that programmes to out-scale and up-scale research findings will need to be flexible and allow participants to drive decision-making throughout. This means that achieving goals within limited timeframes may be tough. Plus, working with a wide range of

stakeholders is likely to be more costly and time-consuming than working with just a few.

Existing set-ups may be channels for out-scaling research findings but may need strengthening. In Nepal and India, forest user groups offered entry points for participatory research on common pool forests in the Himalayas²². Such groups are also potential conduits by which research findings could be out-scaled after projects have finished. However, researchers found that some groups worked better than others and that often human resources (such as those in the forest user groups, for example) needed to be strengthened to enable people to manage common resources fairly. Participation was not always equitable as it sometimes reflected power relationships within communities.

Participation is something that can be fostered. Unless attitudes change and new arrangements are made it will be difficult for people to use new knowledge and research findings. Some projects found that to be able to undertake research using participatory approaches they needed to change the ways things were done or set up new arrangements to foster participation (Box 5.3). In doing this, some communities learned skills that lived on long after the projects ended.

This has implications for out-scaling. If the ways of doing things and arrangements are not in place for equitable participation, then changing and putting them in place will be pre-requisites for the uptake of research findings. It will also help develop systems where stakeholders establish voices in managing and making decisions.

Box 5.3

Fostering participation

Changing the way things are done and setting up new arrangements paves the way for uptake of research findings.

Farmer Field Schools

FAO set up Farmer Field Schools in Southeast Asia in the 1980s to help small-scale rice farmers learn about integrated pest management and, through observation, experimentation and discussion, find the best solutions for their farms. Over the years, Farmer Field Schools have been applied in many different environments, such as livestock production systems.

The schools are an entirely different approach to traditional top-down extension. They are about empowerment, not technology. This meant changing the culture of extension. Rather than using trainers, the Farmer Field Schools use facilitators to encourage 'show and tell' interactive co-learning processes. And once farmers have 'learned to learn', they have a lifelong skill that can be applied to broader needs.

²¹ Ward, A., Salagrama, V. and Joseph, M. 2001. Participation and post-harvest fisheries: An approach to identifying appropriate interventions. NRI: Chatham.

²² R6778 Community Forestry in Nepal: Sustainability and Impacts on Common and Private Resources

Participatory approaches still have to be explored.

Participation in research has taken place at very local scales. This means that participation has empowered grass-roots groups and communities, but has rarely involved or influenced policy makers at any level above the local level. As a result, uptake is limited.

In the context of the shift to an innovation systems approach therefore, the lessons learned from participatory approaches in research indicate that exploring ways to fully involve stakeholders at all levels will be a key element in the future uptake of research findings.

This synopsis of lessons learned for up-scaling and out-scaling research into use is drawn from:

Neiland, A., Bennett, E., and Townsley, P. 2006. 'Participatory research approaches - what have we learned? The experience of the DFID Renewable Natural Resources Research Strategy Programme 1995-2005'.

See

<http://www.research4development.info/pdf/ThematicSummaries/FMSPParticipationSummary.pdf>

Turrall, S. 'Learning from the Renewable Natural Resources Research Strategy. Participatory research approaches'.

See

http://www.research4development.info/pdf/ThematicSummaries/Brief1_Participatory_research_approaches.pdf