

FARMER FIRST – RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

Reflections on the Changing Dynamics of Farmer Innovation in Agricultural Research and Development in Preparation for the Farmer First Revisited Workshop

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Ian Scoones, John Thompson and Robert Chambers

Context

In July 1987, some 50 social and natural scientists of roughly equal numbers met at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex, UK, for a workshop on *'Farmers and Agricultural Research: Complementary Methods'*, later more generally known as the *'Farmer First'* workshop. This workshop was a key moment in the development of approaches to farmer participation in agricultural research and extension, drawing together experiences from a diverse range of individuals and organisations from both North and South. Since then, methodological, institutional and policy experiments have unfolded around the world, aimed at putting farmers first.

Twenty years on, at a time of renewed interest in agriculture for development and a wide recognition of the importance of effective research and development systems, it is worth asking how have these participatory experiments panned out? What have been the successes and failures, and what lessons have been learned? Moreover, given the radically changed contexts facing poor farmers in the developing world today – including increasingly globalised and vertically integrated agri-food systems, changed configurations of public and private R&D, and new governance arrangements affecting innovation systems – how should the challenges and priorities of farmer participation in agricultural research and extension be seen in the 21st century?

To address these issues, reflect on past experiences and look forward to new challenges, the Institute of Development Studies (www.ids.ac.uk), the Future Agricultures Consortium (<http://www.future-agricultures.org/>), the STEPS Centre at Sussex (<http://www.steps-centre.org/>) are jointly hosting an international workshop, *'Farmer First Revisited'* at IDS to coincide with the twentieth anniversary of the first *'Farmer First'* event. The remainder of this note presents some background to this workshop. We would welcome your comments on the overall focus of the event, the specific programme themes and the anticipated outputs and outcomes.

Origins: putting farmers first

Many of those who took part in the first *Farmer First* workshop in 1987 had been developing new participatory research methods for some years, some of them in isolation. Upon meeting their peers at the event, they discovered that new and similar modes of agricultural research and development were evolving in parallel in different parts of the world, but that most of the professional pioneers were in a minority and often worked in the margins of their organisations. The new research methods appeared powerful and responsive in meeting farmers' own priorities. Furthermore, the evidence indicated that these new approaches and methods could serve the complex, diverse and risk-prone agriculture which supports perhaps a quarter of humankind, with lessons for all agriculture. To this, the term 'farmer first' was subsequently applied, distinguishing it from the conventional paradigm of 'transfer of technology'.

Out of that workshop was produced a significant book, entitled *Farmer First: Farmer Innovation and Agricultural Research*, in 1989. Co-edited by Robert Chambers, Arnold Pacey and Lori Ann Thrupp and published by IT Publications, London, the book had wide resonance among the agricultural research and development community. Since its publication, the impact of 'farmer first' approaches reverberated through growing numbers of universities, international and national agricultural research centres, national agricultural extension programmes, non-governmental organisations, and bilateral

and multilateral donors. The approach introduced a suite of new methods and a paradigmatic framework for understanding farmers' own capacity for innovation. It also highlighted the performative nature of agricultural research of both scientists and farmers and the interactions between them.

The farmer first approach argued that much of the problem with conventional agricultural research and extension lies with the processes of generating and transferring technologies, and that much of the solution lies with farmers' own capacities and participation in the research process. Over the past two decades, this perspective has provided a very powerful critique of the conventional organisation and application of agricultural R&D, with its emphasis on transfer of technology models. This critique pointed out that if research develops and transfers technology in a linear fashion to farmers very often these technologies are found to be inappropriate to the social, physical and economic setting in which those farmers have to operate. At the very least such technologies needed complementary organisational, policy and other changes to enable them to be put into productive use.

To remedy this problem, feedback loops were suggested as a way of informing technology developers about technology users needs. This was a major change in thinking for the agricultural R&D community. In fact it was only possible to start and challenge the primacy of agricultural science in this way because a number of researchers had established convincing evidence that indigenous knowledge held by rural people had value and could play a role in technology development.

Beyond farmer first?

While many hailed farmer first thinking as a step in the right direction, some argued that the approach failed to consider the socio-cultural and political economic dimensions of knowledge creation, innovation, transmission and use within rural societies and scientific organisations. It is not surprising, therefore, that, when applied in a simplistic, populist manner, participatory strategies encounter the same sorts of problems as other interventionist approaches and programmes. No matter how firm the commitment, the concept of powerful outsiders helping powerless insiders is always present. Thus any attempt to 'blend' or 'integrate' local knowledge into existing scientific procedures is liable to assume that rural people's knowledge represents an easily definable 'body' or 'stock' of knowledge ready for extraction and incorporation. However, rural people's knowledge, like scientific knowledge, is always fragmentary, partial and provisional in nature. It is never fully unified or integrated in terms of an underlying cultural logic or system of classification. Moreover, knowledge is embedded in and emerges out of a multi-dimensional universe in which diverse cultural, economic, environmental, and socio-political factors intersect and influence one another. Knowledge, whether 'indigenous' or 'scientific', is not a straightforward accumulation of 'facts', but involves ways of comprehending the world: knowledge is always in the making.

Five years after the *Farmer First* event, a second workshop was held at IDS with the aim of taking stock of emerging lessons and engaging with this critique. Issues of contested knowledge, power and institutions were central to this discussion, moving beyond an earlier focus on participatory methods and innovation processes. The book *Beyond Farmer First: Rural People's Knowledge, Agricultural Research and Extension Practice*, co-edited by Ian Scoones and John Thompson and published by IT Publications in 1994, summed up the arguments of this workshop, setting an agenda for critical reflection and action which aimed to go beyond 'naïve populism' towards a more sophisticated and nuanced approach to participation in agricultural research and extension.

Reflecting on the past and looking to the future

So what has happened in the two decades since the first Farmer First conference? How have such ideas spread? What new perspectives have emerged? What have been the responses to the critiques? And what have been the institutional and organisational responses in mainstream agricultural R&D globally? Twenty years on, it is time to reflect on this experience, and think about new directions and innovations.

Since embracing participatory methods from the late 1980s, scientists at international and national agricultural research centres and a variety of public and private agencies have encountered both successes and failures. Innovations have been identified, as well as shortcomings, among the panoply of participatory approaches that have been developed. The early days of debate for and against the

participation of farmers, residents and local land users in research have given way to more grounded discussions about appropriate approaches and specific methods for particular circumstances.

Rather than advocating one form or 'brand' of participatory research over another, researchers are innovating and experimenting to match the methods and the situation. They are also working to bring the insights of everyday practice in the field back into the design of new technologies and future research practices, protocols, structures and strategies. Thus, many researchers are not asking if participatory methods should be used, but rather when and how, and which type of method, in combination with which traditional research tools. There has also been a growing recognition that the organisation of agricultural research and extension itself was a major reason why science was failing to improve the livelihoods of poor people, and a strong critique of the conventional organisation of agricultural R&D has emerged.

Overall, some promising trends can be noted including:

- A focus on the ethics and power relations involved in participatory research approaches;
- A call for more accountability, standards of practice, codes of conduct and constructive critique among practitioners of participatory research;
- An exploration of research on the process of participation under uneven relations of power, including conflict resolution;
- A shift from participation in technology transfer to collaborative science and innovations systems;
- A creative proliferation of hybrid methods, mixing quantitative and qualitative analysis, and social and biological approaches;
- The experimental combination of geographic information systems (GIS), remote sensing, maps, models and participation;
- A serious effort to scale up, from farm to landscape level, participatory research and an exploration of regional and national applications (adaptive management; co-management; and scenarios and future-visioning);
- A willingness to place research questions and results in their social and historical context;
- Attempts to link specific practices and information to broader meaning, including interpretations of history and visions of the future, through scenarios and other integrative tools for negotiation and planning.

Whether in the context of the recent World Bank's *World Development Report* for 2008 on agriculture, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Poverty Network report on agriculture or the UK Department for International Development's 2005 agricultural policy paper, emphasis now is being placed on efforts to develop 'pro-poor' agriculture that is also 'pro-growth'. But to achieve such goals, there is also a recognition of the need to boost the capacities of innovation systems to generate more responsive technologies and practices and foster more resilient and robust systems that address the new and fast changing contexts faced by farmers, with their increasing levels of risk and uncertainty.

Since 1987, a number of major changes in the context for agricultural R&D have become evident. The recent evolution of agricultural research systems in developing countries has shown a change in focus from national public sector research organisations to one that emphasises a diversified public-private system, in which clients, especially farmers, are key partners in financing, planning, implementing and assessing research. Consistent with these changes, research planning, monitoring and evaluation has evolved from centrally-driven top-down approaches to give greater emphasis to decentralised and participatory approaches, in which farmer priorities and capacities are key inputs. Although some progress has been made in reforms to enhance accountability and impacts of research, these systems still face major challenges in ensuring that demand-driven approaches provide coherent research

programmes consistent with national policy objectives, and in ensuring that they reflect the interests of the poor and are not captured by elites.

It is in relation to these new contexts that we need to revisit the farmer first debates, learn from experiences (successful and less so) and look forward to the challenges ahead. The December 2007 workshop at IDS will be organised around three inter-related themes:

1. Agricultural innovation systems – putting farmers first?

This first theme will explore the experiences of farmer participatory research and participatory technology development over the past twenty years, asking how farmers interact in the diverse systems of agricultural innovation found in the developing world. Do emerging innovation systems - involving new public and private actors and complex, often global, value chains - put farmers first? And if so, how do farmers engage? This theme will also examine the intersections of knowledge systems in processes of innovation, asking how pro-poor science and technology can emerge.

2. Organising agricultural research and development for the 21st century

The second theme will look at the organisation of agricultural research and development, and the challenges of farmer participation on large scales in often highly conventional organisations. Experiences from the CGIAR centres (Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research), NARS (National Agricultural Research Systems) and the private sector will be explored, alongside more bottom-up initiatives emerging from farmer organisations and federations, non-governmental organisations and unions. In addition, experiences of new, hybrid organisational arrangements, involving, for example, partnerships between public and private sectors or integrated approaches involving farmers as well as technicians (as in farmer field schools) will be examined. This theme will ask whether the current institutional and organisational framework – for research, extension and agricultural education – really does put farmers first, and if not, what do we do about it?

3. Methodological innovation, personal and organisational change

A central feature of the 'farmer first' approaches of the past 20 years has been methodological innovation. This has resulted in an expansion of a vast array of tools, techniques and experiments available for research and development in agriculture, with a diversity of experiences from across the world. But a key question has been how has methodological innovation influenced and been influenced by personal, professional and organisational learning and change? What has allowed changes at different levels – the individual, the organisation, the system – to happen and what has acted to close things down? Are there examples where the process of reflection, reframing and use of lessons learned during the participatory research process resulted in changed behaviour and improved performance? This session will explore some of these experiences in contrasting settings, drawing out broader lessons.

Contributions

For each of these themes we have invited participants to submit short papers (3-5000 words) and posters documenting experiences – good and bad – reflecting on the one of the themes identified above. The emphasis will be on drawing lessons for the future from particular, located case studies and personal experiences.

The workshop will involve approximately 75 people, representing a diverse mix of natural science and social science backgrounds, and a balance of age and gender, geographical focus and thematic interest. While we have invited some participants who attended the earlier *Farmer First* and *Beyond Farmer First* workshops, we have also sought to include others who, perhaps inspired by or in reaction to these earlier events, have creatively innovated in the field in more recent years. In addition to researchers and practitioners, we have also invited a selection of farmer representatives and some 'science leaders' – people working for governments, international organisations and donor agencies – who are key to the way things move forward.

Expected Outputs and Outcomes: Towards a 'Pro-Poor Innovation Alliance'

The full workshop outputs, including presentations, papers and proceedings, will be posted on the *Farmer First Revisited* website. The website will be used to support and share information among participants of the event itself and with a wider audience (including the many people who expressed interest in participating in the workshop, but who could not attend due to scheduling conflicts and space restrictions). All papers submitted for the workshop have been posted on the website, along with other relevant background information on the programme and the participants. The site also contains an interactive 'wiki-timeline' of milestone events and publications related to farmer-led innovation in agricultural R&D. During the workshop, a blog will also be set up on the site, to which we invite all participants and other interested individuals to contribute their own insights and opinions of the proceedings and related matters. In addition, a book will follow in 2008, offering (highly edited) highlights of papers and plenary discussions, which we hope to publish through Practical Action Publications, publishers of the *Farmer First* and *Beyond Farmer First* books.

In bringing together a diverse range of participants the aim of this 'Farmer First Revisited' event will not only be to spark critical reflection and debate, but also to build a community of practice around the challenges of pro-poor science and technology for agricultural research and development. Such a network – which we have provisionally labelled the '*Pro-Poor Innovation Alliance*' – can potentially develop as an important player in emerging global initiatives in the field of agricultural research and development, whether in the context of the follow up to the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), the implementation of the science and technology strategies of the African Union's NEPAD CAADP agenda or the Gates/Rockefeller Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA).

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