

Fostering farmer-scientist research collaboration on improving crop productivity and profitability - the IFAP perspective *

Beatriz del Rosarioⁱ

Abstract

[To be completed]

Introduction

The International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), the world's organization of agricultural producers, believes that improving the involvement of farmers' organizations in agricultural research priorities setting, design, and implementation are vital to reach the Millenium Development goal of reducing poverty by half by year 2015. The IFAP Committee on Agricultural Research looks at the processes supporting the collaboration of farmers' organizations and research centres for a real integration of farmers' points of view from the definition of agricultural research priorities to the dissemination of these research results. IFAP farmers' organizations underline that agricultural research should have one main focus, namely improve farmers' livelihood and incomes. All agricultural research activities should therefore give its projects this orientation.

Ensure farmers' representation in research centers

Currently, several research centres include local farmers in their research work, particularly during the experiments' stages. But only a few collaborate on a regular basis with farmers organizations in their countries, giving them the possibility to be ready to contribute soundly and continuously in the research. But this continuous participation of farmers is crucial for well-oriented and efficient research projects.

It is necessary for better efficiency that the representation of farmers in agricultural research structures at local, national, regional and international levels should be institutionalised. Formalizing this representation would contribute to long term collaboration between farmers and researchers, for the good of both sides.

In this objective, farmers' organisations should develop close working relationships with local, regional, national and international agricultural research networks. This requires time and perseverance but the existing experiences are promising. Farmers' organisations should also be involved in governance bodies of research centres to give a farmer's perspective on research orientations. To date, IFAP is quite active in GFAR and regional fora such as APAARI, and FARA. IFAP 's membership in APAARI will formalize and strengthen its relationship with the regional fora.

Moreover, research centres and their networks should open up to the contribution of different stakeholders such as farmers' organisations. This will enrich the debates and programmes of agricultural research. Beyond the national level, agricultural research centres or networks that wish to work with small farmers must face concrete hurdles which call for an additional effort: the coverage of participation expenses for small farmers as well as the establishment of language interpretation services during their meetings, when needed.

Influence the choice and orientation of agricultural research

A continuous relationship between research centres and farmers' organisations is necessary for a better understanding of farmers and researchers concerns. The objective of such constructive collaboration is to reconnect agricultural research with farmers' needs and concerns.

First, farmers' organisations should identify their needs and concerns precisely so that they are able to come to the discussion table with an open and solid proposal to agricultural researchers. Research Centres can thus take note of these priorities and establish, in cooperation with several stakeholders, agricultural research lines useful to all those involved.

Moreover, involved farmers can provide feedback and advice on on-going research initiatives and on the effectiveness and usefulness of research results: such feedback could encourage research centres to reorient their work or to embark on new research work.

The choice of agricultural research issues should be set up in consultation with other national research centres to avoid duplication. A national coordination is necessary. Moreover, facilitating trans-boundary cooperation on research issues is important for farmers, as is sharing the results of research.

Finally, the choice of agricultural research priorities should take into account the whole process from the development of priorities to the dissemination of the research results. Each stage up to extension services should be integrated at the preparatory phase in order to ensure from the beginning that the results will reach target individuals.

Necessary research characteristics in the agricultural sector

Agricultural research should imperatively include technical and socioeconomic dimensions and should be treated in a multidisciplinary approach in order to concretely improve food security and farmers' livelihoods. Agricultural research must go well beyond the development of new plants and the improvement of some agricultural processes: research should deal with socio-economic issues such as the economic organization of farmers, initiatives to sell their produce in the markets, necessary legal and political frameworks, etc. The overall objective is to improve the living conditions of farmers, and consequently to strengthen the economic and political powers of farmers. Farmers deeply wish for researchers to tackle these issues. There are on-going IFAP programs addressing these issues, namely regoverning markets (RMP), empowering smallholder farmers in markets (ESFIM) and linking smallholder farmers to dynamic markets (GPP-LFM) which are briefly discussed in the next section.

Moreover, the choice of agricultural research priorities should take under consideration cost effective projects. If not, farmers will not be able to take advantage of the results of the research.

Ultimately, enough funds should be dedicated to real current priority needs. There is a tendency not to address real on-farm research problems. And yet, the needs exist and solutions can be found.

The role of governments

There is a need to establish new mechanisms that will revive linkages between farmers' organisations, research centres, and extension services. Farmers' organisations think that it is the responsibility of the government to set up an efficient consultation process for the overall agricultural research sector, with the common focus of improving farmers' livelihoods.

Moreover, governments should finance agricultural research properly: most governments consider agricultural research as a priority but few give research centres real and continuous financial support, especially in support of farmers' organisations involvement. They should be encouraged to give more logistic and financial support to research centres. Likewise, governments should ensure the financing of sufficient technical staff in research centres and extension services in the all country.

Governments should also set up an appropriate legislative and policy framework that encourages national agricultural research systems to improve agricultural research in their

country. This framework should allow the active involvement of farmers' organisations in agricultural research processes. Legislation should also encourage agricultural research to be undertaken by other players outside government, such as the university and private research service providers in specific fields.

When appropriate, governments should rationalise the agricultural research sector in their country in order to harmonize research policies, avoid duplication and use funds in the most efficient way possible.

Moreover, governments should ensure that linkages between farmers' organisations, research centres and extension services are tackled in agricultural schools, scientific universities, etc.

Farmers' organisations should take the responsibility of supporting the effort of governments through their expertise on agricultural issues.

Access to research results (extension services, internet)

Strengthening extension services in rural areas is a key component of the development of the farming sector: farmers' organisations need to have access to solid extension services at the grassroots level in order to build a concrete collaboration. Extension services have been run down around the world due to financial cuts. There is a real need for farmers to establish local effective extension services which put research findings in farmer-friendly user forms and disseminate the information to the farm community. Their geographical representation should be taken into account and when inexistent, the creation of new extension centres is requested.

Extension services should work in collaboration with research centres and farmers' organisations to ensure the dissemination of their findings. In fact, as part of the services offered to their members, farmers' organizations can efficiently disseminate the results of that research thanks to their farmer's networks.

Furthermore, the dissemination of agricultural research results should be evaluated and improved where necessary (for example, improve Internet access in rural areas) because farmers must access them through the most appropriate means adapted to their situation.

Finally, technical advisors in extension services should be given updated training to improve their efficiency and qualifications. They should also mainly live in the rural areas where they work to ensure a continuous collaboration with local farmers.

Public research: what collaboration with the private sector?

Governments should not fully cede their responsibilities in agricultural research to the private sector. They should continue to develop their own projects so that farmers are given choices in new technologies, and do not become unduly dependent on private seed or technology suppliers.

Moreover, it is vital to maintain public investments in agricultural research and keep the ownership of key research results to protect public interests.

It is true that in the light of budget constraints, the private sector (seed companies, fertilizer dealers, biotechnology firms, plant nutrient developers, etc.) could support agricultural public research and extension initiatives. Private groups should be left free to develop technologies that they see fit, for profit or other objectives, using where applicable whatever basic technologies have been developed by public research institutions. These private groups should be allowed to freely compete with each other so that farmers can make choices based on their needs and capacities.

But governments should ensure that lower-level technologies, such as traditional breeds or those using locally-available materials, which many farmers can more easily afford and acquire, should continue to be developed and made available to those who want to use them.

IFAP Programs on Empowering Farmers in the Market Place

Worldwide decision-makers in government, industry, and education have been struggling with understanding on the scope of the changes in the market place (due to trade liberalization, market concentration, government deregulation and devolution, food safety and quality concerns, including private sector standards and rise of modern markets), how the changes will impact small farmers , and finding the proper ways to deal with the changes. Empowering farmers in the market place is a unifying issue for IFAP. New markets are seen as new opportunities to address rural development issues. Access to this new opportunity could play bigger role in wider poverty reduction. Linking small farmers with the new market is not necessarily a good or a bad thing, but some small farmers with the right skills are more ready than others.

IFAP is increasingly involved in the steering of applied research programmes by a number of international research and development networks, and in the feedback of research outcomes to farmers' organizations. The three on-going IFAP programs are as follows:

(1) Regoverning Markets Program (RMP): This is a global initiative to help producers in developing countries secure more equitable benefits in response to market changes. It show cases research-best practices-policy advocacy continuum. It is a collaborative research and policy support to specifically: (1) understand the keys to inclusion into restructured market in order to address implications and opportunities for small scale producers and enterprises, (2) understand what is best practice in connecting small scale producers to dynamic markets, and (3) bring these findings into the wider policy arena with facts and recommendations, practical action for public sector policy and private sector strategies. IFAP pilot activities are in Kenya and Philippines. Phase 1 will be completed in March 2008 and a larger 2-year program is being contemplated.

Some 40 case studies were undertaken. The case of NORMIN Veggies of Northern Mindanao, Philippines shows an example of collective action and organizational innovation involving small scale producers in tapping opportunities in the modern changing markets. It adopted a clustering strategy that benefited the growers in terms of their bargaining power (quality, volume and regularity), diversified and more predictable markets (traditional and modern), better income (higher price and increase profit by 15-25 %; reduce losses), and better relations among growers (open communication lines and sharing technologies)

Some of the lessons learned from RMP are:

- The foundation of sustainable success requires organisation at producer level, receptive business and enabling public policy that is facilitated effectively (e.g .Normin Veggies Philippines, Ma's Food Sri Lanka)
- Sustainability of change is more likely to be achieved by enabling agents who work on helping people – value chain players
- Public and private policy makers enable successful outcomes when they encourage supply chain stakeholders to perform to their best potential (eg Argentina's Code of Best Commercial Practice, Mexico's phyto-sanitary law that gives farmers a major role in service delivery, requiring co-operation, Kenya-policy makers formulation of all inclusive dairy policy led to inclusion of informal milk trade)
- The private sector is under-utilised as a partner in development

There are important implications from the RMP findings with respect to the roles of various stakeholders. For instance, farmers' organizations should (1)build capacity to understand and adapt to change, (2)make collective action as a competitive edge to access market, and (3) be active politically and seek to find a single voice whenever possible. The public sector should create and support a research and information base to accompany the change

process including early warning systems to identify unexpected changes. The private sector should engage in multi stakeholder dialogue and understand the need for a transition period when applying standards for food safety , quality, labour standards etc. The NGO's should (1) promote adaptation to change in their approach, (2) facilitate with advice, information and promotion, (3) interact with the public sector as part of multi stakeholder forums, (4) seek to facilitate learning about the management of change rather than provide direct solutions.

(2) IFAP-ECART-IFAD Program on “Empowering Smallholder Farmers in Markets”

(ESFIM): This is an action-research within IFAP network to develop institutional and policy reform initiatives to strengthen farmer organizations and enhance their power in markets. It is supported by IFAD, CTA and AgriCord. It is a research programme to give IFAP members key orientations on how to better interfere with markets and share case studies between farmers around the world. Phase 1 did rapid assessments in selected countries to identify bottlenecks. Phase 2 shall focus on removing barriers to entry into markets, reducing market risk, reducing transaction costs, strengthening bargaining power, and supporting producer organisations, leading to formulation of organizational development and policy advocacy agenda of farmer organizations.

(3) Global Partnership Programme of GFAR on “Linking Smallholder Farmers to Dynamic Markets” (GPP–LFM): A multi-stakeholder initiative to use research to help small farmers graduate to commercial production and build their capacity to engage in supply chains linked with modern markets. It involves research in policy and institutions, markets and value chains, and capacity building and institutional strengthening. IFAP is represented in Steering Committee. The program is currently at formative stage.

Reflections

There are of course myriad of other cases of policy related problems besetting third world agriculture, which would even make the examples above as comparatively trivial. The point however, is that while we may be successful in the R&D system to generate more superior technologies, agricultural growth can not be guaranteed unless a conducive policy environment is in place.

The whole agribusiness landscape has already changed considerably. Vertical and horizontal coordination (e.g. among farmers, traders, logistics suppliers) to improve efficiency have yet to be a common feature in third world agriculture. Concerns about food quality and safety as well as convenience have become major driving forces. These changes have given birth to strict production and processing requirements (e.g. GAP, HACCP) and competitiveness is no longer reckoned on individual firm or farm basis, but in terms of supply chain. Supermarkets have also proliferated and increasingly larger volume of total farm produce is retailed through them. Small farmers are increasingly marginalized since they have not been prepared for all these developments. Best practices in organizational innovation through collective action or active interdependence among farmers could become a stronger force to reckon with in the development of commodity supply chain. Unfortunately, the R&D system has not been as observant. It appears to have missed the signs as it was only recently that supply chain management has become an important concern among R&D institutions. Linking farmers to market as major R&D goal is important, but has long been overdue.

Support to farmers' organisations working on improvement of agricultural productivity including processing and marketing will certainly be needed. Research for development in agriculture should consider agenda setting among farmers' organisations that will guide research institutes in the priority setting for their research, including backing up and preparation of this priority setting and organizing the demand side in general. IFAP is increasingly involved and will continue to be so, in the steering of applied research programmes by a number of international research and development networks, and in the feedback of research outcomes to farmers' organisations. Institutionalized relations with international research groups, such as ECART (EU), Regoverning Markets (global) and others are the backbone and desired outcome.

Policy analysis and advocacy is a critical R&D area. Wide disparity also exists among institutions, both within and across countries, in terms of the level of excellence by which these activities are carried out. Scientific exchanges and partnership in this area will certainly be rewarding for most NARS and IFAP farmers' organizations and would enhance the level of prominence and utility of agricultural research for development to IFAP network.

There is a need for IFAP presence during discussions of similar programs, looking at complementation and ensuring knowledge will reach the grassroots in usable form, hence the need for an effective learning network. Efforts must result in actual projects that bring concrete benefits to farmers. National policy advocacy initiatives need to be complemented with efforts at local government level and with the private sector.

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ⁱ Betty P. del Rosario, IFAP Asian Regional Coordinator, 60, rue St. Lazare, 75009 Paris, France.