

Bringing
Farmer
Innovation
to policy
levels



Photo: Will Critchley

Lobbying for policy support to local innovation

Mitiku Haile

In 1996, the “Sasakawa Global 2000” campaign was launched in Tigray. This offered farmers a package of external inputs on credit and has focused on the better-watered areas. More and more farmers are being drawn into this scheme. Some farmers observed yield increases, especially in the initial years when rainfall was favourable.

Many farmers, however, are withdrawing from the scheme. They found that inputs were too expensive given uncertain rainfall and yields, and the lack of transport and marketing facilities. Some farmers question the suitability of chemical fertilisers for their conditions and want to use manure and other organic resources to enhance soil fertility. In pest management, many farmers find that Global 2000 methods ignore their indigenous techniques. The development agents (DAs) working directly with these farmers and Mekelle University, which offers development-oriented training began to recognise that farmers want extension to consider their own knowledge and creativity in land husbandry. It was evident that the approach to extension needed to be re-considered.

Research disregards potential partners

Agricultural researchers in Ethiopia usually set their own agenda on the basis of their own assumptions. With the recent decentralisation of research, the scientists were supposed to focus on alleviating the constraints to agriculture in their particular region and to solve local problems. However, no consideration was given to the fact that farmers might want to take part in the search for local solutions. Farmers have, of course, been experiment-

ing on ways to manage soil, water, plants and animals for centuries, long before formal research began. They have developed an intimate knowledge of their environment and found new and better ways to manage local resources. Any research on agricultural intensification needs to consider this local knowledge and innovation.

Biased agricultural training

Agricultural education in Ethiopia, with few exceptions, has paid little attention to local knowledge. Course content and structure have been based on western concepts and large-scale commercial systems of production. The Ethiopian agrarian system is, however, highly fragmented and dominated by smallholders who are orientated mainly to subsistence. Education and training need to be transformed to reflect this reality and raise admiration for the farmers' abilities to produce under adverse conditions.

ISWC-Ethiopia recognised the need for policy change so that local knowledge and innovation would become the basis for formulating agricultural extension, research and training programmes. Therefore, besides identifying farmer innovation, extending promising local innovations and promoting participatory research to validate and develop them further, ISWC-Ethiopia tried to influence relevant policies.

Several targets

Different activities in lobbying for policy change were targeted at various levels of decision-making in several institutions:

- **Baito** (local council) The *baito* is the lowest level of government and together

with the community it determines land use and management. ISWC-Ethiopia works closely with the Tigray BoA in organising village-level workshops, in which *baito* members become aware of the importance of farmer innovation.

- **Extension agents, specialists and supervisors** Through training sessions, field-level seminars and dialogue, extension staff in various positions are shown the processes and dynamics of local innovation. They are led to recognise innovations in their extension areas and the contribution of innovators to improving land husbandry. They are encouraged to integrate innovators into their extension work.
- **Research scientists and policy-makers** Researchers from Mekelle University, Mekelle Research Centre and the Ethiopian Agricultural Research Organisation and policy makers from BoA and the Ministries of Agriculture (MoA) and Education (MoE) are exposed to local innovation in land husbandry. They are drawn into discussing their policies on research and education.
- **The media** Representatives from the mass media are approached to spread information about innovative farmers and about promising innovations to a wider audience.

Strategies to invite policy dialogue

The major strategy is to arouse curiosity and enthusiasm among DAs, researchers and policy makers about local innovation.

DAs in particular have been quick to recognise innovators and invite them to be partners in extension. Researchers are challenged by DAs and farmer innovators to look more closely at certain innovations and, together with farmers, to work on them further. Policy makers are stimulated to recognise the importance of local knowledge and innovation in strengthening the extension system and in guiding research to help farmers improve what they already know.

ISWC-Ethiopia decided to pursue Participatory Technology Development (PTD) by introducing the concepts and spirit gradually on a wide front. Progress is slower than would be possible by focusing on a pilot area, but we will not face the problems of trying to scale up from a few isolated experiments. We do not impose PTD. Instead, researchers are challenged to open dialogue at every possible opportunity. We emphasise forging a functional link between researchers, DAs, *baitos* and innovators.

This emphasis has guided the choice of members in the ISWC-Ethiopia Steering Committee, which discusses and approves the annual project plans. Influential and committed persons were chosen who could foster partnership between stakeholders. The members include the Head of the BoA and individuals from research institutes and NGOs who have long experience in land husbandry research and development.

Examples of lobbying activities

Various types of activities were designed to influence policy either directly or indirectly. For example:

- **Network shops** bringing together researchers, DAs, policy makers and innovators have been organised at Regional, Zonal and District levels, and a national workshop is being planned; field trips to innovators are included;
- **Media coverage** the TV, radio and press are invited to make the achievements and aspirations of innovators more widely known; recently, journalists have, on their own initiative, visited innovators and interviewed them in their villages and at village-level workshops, as well as at fairs and conferences, such as the Anglophone Africa workshop on farmer innovation held in Mekelle earlier this year;
- **Newsletters** dealing with farmer innovation and written in the local Tigrigna language are produced twice a year for the farming communities, *baitos* and DAs;
- **Research reports, proceedings and journal articles** are written and distributed to researchers, BoA and MoA staff and policy makers;
- **Personal visits** are made to Government Ministries, Embassy officials and NGO heads to brief them about project approaches and activities;

- **Travelling seminars** bring farmer innovators, DAs and researchers to the sites of innovation and give innovators a chance to interact with village-level policy makers.

Some signs of change

Thus far, three years after the programme started in Tigray, we see signs that local innovation in land husbandry is being recognised and promoted.

Integration into BoA activities.

Village-level seminars, during which villagers assess local innovations, are now being organised as part of BoA extension activities. Views of innovators are taken into account during land-use planning at village level. The BoA now organises awards not only for Global 2000 farmers but for local innovators (often, farmers who do not accept Global 2000). Innovators are involved in regional field days to show what they have achieved on their land and so gain recognition by researchers, DAs and policy makers. This encourages the innovators, creates opportunities for them to disseminate their innovations and stimulates discussions between different actors in agricultural development.

Increased openness in extension.

Extension approaches and packages are becoming more open to local knowledge. DAs are recognising - and some are even documenting - farmers' informal experimentation in land husbandry. Concerns raised by farmer innovators are no longer hushed-up but brought to higher levels by DAs and the innovators themselves e.g at conferences. In the past, only farmers involved in the Global 2000 scheme were invited to regional farmers' conferences; now farmer innovators are invited too.

Official support to local initiatives.

The BoA supports local initiatives, such as the activities started by communities to divide up rights to sloping land among community members. *Baitos* have responded to innovators' concerns about their rights to use improved land (see Box).

Change in attitude of researchers.

Some researchers recognise that farmers do experiment and can be partners in research. A few are exploring farmers' innovations further in technical terms and are arranging PTD experiment with farmers. However, this aspect moves very slowly.

Incorporation into university teaching.

A module on PTD has been incorporated into the "Research Methods" course given to all students of agriculture at Mekelle University. Several national and international MSc and PhD students are making field studies on farmer innovation and experimentation. Students doing their

How we influenced policy: testimony of a woman innovator

During our travelling seminar, we visited a fellow farmer in Southern Tigray in Raya Valley, where there was a very big and wide gully. It was not considered useful land during land allocation. A farmer had worked on the gully and made it productive, but when he started to grow crops there, the *baito* took the land over, saying he had enough land and that this reclaimed gully should be distributed to others. We saw this problem during the seminar and discussed it. The *baito* in Raya Valley reviewed the mistake it had made and gave the land back to the farmer. This is how we influenced policy.

Ms Leteyesus Gobena, ISWC Anglophone Workshop on Farmer Innovation in Africa, February 2000, Mekelle, Ethiopia

compulsory 5-month practical attachment are increasingly interested in documenting indigenous knowledge. In-service students from the BoA, NGOs and development projects are keen to continue examining local innovation when they return to their posts. Some of them even use their own resources (time, energy and material) to document innovations.

Local innovation for food security.

Particularly in the drier areas of Tigray, farmers and DAs are criticising Global 2000 technology and find it unsuitable. DAs in southern Tigray actually challenge the targets being set for bringing farmers into the scheme. Now the Integrated Food Security Desk is exploring the potential of farmer innovation in identifying appropriate technologies for the 16 most drought-prone districts of Tigray.

What next?

The various activities have been documented and a database of farmers' innovations has been established. However, it is still necessary that the documented observation be critically analysed in the field. This will help identify successful innovations that can already be disseminated and promising innovations that could be improved. It will be especially important that more researchers are attracted to support experimenting farmers in assessing and further developing their own innovations. It is our challenge now to maintain the dynamism of the process and to move into PTD on a broad basis.

Mitiku Haile, President, Mekelle University,
PO Box 231, Mekelle, Tigray, Ethiopia
(mekelle.university@telecom.net.et)