



## Identifying and cataloguing farmer innovations

**Ruth Tagoe**

Farmers in southern Ghana, as everywhere in the world, are constantly developing ways to solve the problems they face, or finding ways to cope with the difficulties they have in farming or in managing their resources. However, these innovations are not generally known or considered by researchers or extensionists working in the same region, and often, neither are they known by other farmers facing the same difficulties. In order to share the most interesting initiatives and exchange valuable information, PROLINNOVA Ghana started a process aiming to identify and catalogue farmer innovations in the southern half of the country. Starting in 2004, this process took place in the Volta, Western and Central regions, hoping to create awareness of what farmers are doing, and to strengthen partnerships between farmers, development organisations and research scientists.

As a field extensionist working for the Ministry of Agriculture, I was asked to look for farmers with interesting innovations. This was not easy at first, even though I know the area where I work quite well. Not everybody recognises what “innovation” means, so I had to start by asking for someone who is doing “something new”. Some would refer to something they tried once, and which is not visible anymore. And many farmers found it difficult to differentiate what they have tried and done on their own from what somebody had told them. But the process got easier and easier, and after a couple of months I had approximately 50 cases, all of which were presented to PROLINNOVA. These were ranked according to various criteria (usefulness, replicability), and field visits were organised to the ten most interesting cases. Farmers were then asked to provide further information, answering our questions in detail, and showing what they had done. We took photographs and wrote the texts for a small catalogue, trying to present each case as clearly as possible.

While the catalogue was being prepared, some of these farmers were also invited to present their innovations in different exhibitions. The first was during the World Food Day celebrations of 2005, held in the capital, Accra. Together with farmers from different parts of the country, Mr. Kwame Tetteh, one of the farmers on our list, presented a cashew nut cracker and a cashew nut oil extractor which he designed himself. Three weeks later, in November 2005, a workshop was organised in Koforidua, in the Eastern Region, with the similar intention of showing new ideas of indigenous origin, and to exchange and disseminate this information. Four of “our” farmers joined a group of more than 50 innovators, showing some of their

innovations and ideas: vaccines prepared from local herbs and chilli pepper, the use of herbs, neem and myrrh to preserve smoked fish, the use of cocoa pods to increase soil fertility, or the use of plantain pseudo-stems for mulching in the dry season.

A third exhibition was organised in Cape Coast in June 2006, bringing farmers together from all of southern Ghana. By then, the catalogue was ready, so farmers were able to see other farmers’ innovations, and also see themselves and other farmers in a small booklet. This catalogue is now being distributed all over the country, creating overall awareness of farmer innovativeness, and inducing other innovators to show what they are doing. Further dissemination takes place via the radio: every week, the Ministry of Agriculture has a one-hour programme in Radio Central FM in Cape Coast. There I am able to describe what we have found, and to highlight the importance of farmer innovations.

Although we have only recently begun to distribute the catalogue, the results of this process of collection, documentation and exchange are already visible. Many farmers were present at the different exhibitions and saw what the innovators were showing. They were also able to talk to them, ask all sorts of questions, and then try something similar in their own farms. Going back to the field, it is very interesting to see farmers already trying out someone else’s idea.

Needless to say, documenting innovations is not an easy process. Farmers generally do not keep records, while it may be essential to consider input quantities, concentrations, or the energy or effort required for each case. And effective innovations dealing with a particular process, such a pest, are easily lost once the problem has been dealt with successfully. Other stakeholders are not generally keen to participate, while farmers themselves have very little time to spend talking about what they do, or even attending exhibitions. Because they are so busy, organising the exhibitions was equally difficult. Nevertheless, we are sure of a positive impact: by seeing themselves in a catalogue, farmers feel acknowledged and rewarded for their efforts. By seeing their neighbours or other villagers, farmers are motivated to share what they have discovered or innovated. Most are interested in trying new things out. And even though getting extensionists or researchers interested in what farmers are doing is still a challenge, we feel that it is easier if they are able to see, in a clear and well presented format, what farmers are trying out and achieving. Bringing to light new ideas of indigenous origin is surely a positive step.

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