

Shifting farmers to the centre of relationships

Whereas rural people have always known that it takes all five fingers to make a whole hand, despite differences in shape and length, it has taken agricultural professionals quite some time to understand this simple fact. This article describes how recent events in Northern Ghana resulted in the need to reorient relations between researchers, extension workers, NGOs and farmers. All had to evolve methods for supporting one another.

David Millar

In 1992, a World Bank mission to Ghana proposed that a Unified Extension System (UES) be implemented. It prescribed the unification of all agricultural extension services, and extension to farmers channelled through one field officer - 'Frontline Staff' (MOFA, Ministry of Food and Agriculture Report, 1993). This coincided with a World Bank proposal to rationalise the number of employees on the government pay roll. Hence, a frontline officer would have to be able to cope with a wider range of activities, cover a wider geographical area as a result of the reduced number of field staff, and serve a larger constituency of farmers, with a more restricted budget. Structural Adjustment Programmes also necessitated cutting back research budgets, especially for mobility and field work, and encouraging more on-farm trials and farmer-generation of technologies (Hardter, 1989).

Until this period there had been rather weak links between NGOs, research and government services. Where it existed, it was more a one-sided 'supply-driven' relationship: NGOs offered research findings to farmers, with no room for feedback to reorient research. Between extension services and NGOs there was a latent rivalry or unhealthy competition, and mechanisms for dialogue between the two were non-functional. All of these actors saw the farmers as mere receptacles for their innovations or some type of experimental marbles. The ability to innovate, to teach others and to spread innovations was seen as the prerogative of government and NGOs, and not the work of farmers.

Extension

With the emerging UES, monthly planning meetings of the MFA in the Northern Region saw the growing involvement of NGOs. They were able to incorporate plans into the regional plan and/or identify areas of the regional plan that they could implement. In order to guarantee the uniform execution of activities, NGO staff were trained alongside government staff in joint workshops. NGOs were even asked to assist frontline staff with

travel logistics to enable them to reach a reasonable coverage. The annual reports of the MOFA had a section on the field activities of NGOs. This linkage was even stronger at district level. For example, in the Yendi area, of 326 bullocks trained, 126 were trained by the Tamale Archdiocesan Agricultural Programme (TAAP) and 200 by government staff. TAAP provided training for all groups. Six TAAP farmer groups in livestock health received health advisory support from the government agent.

Research

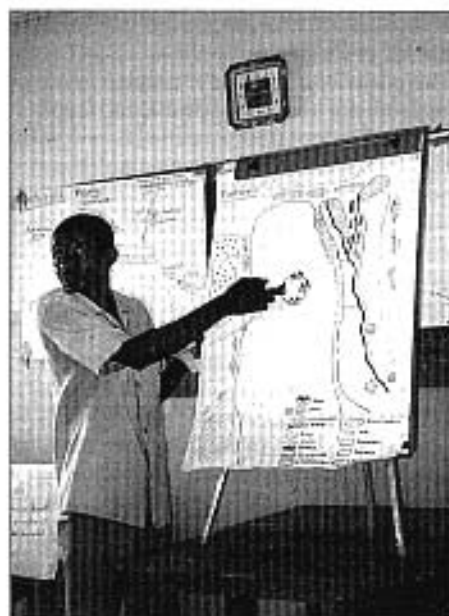
Researchers were also part of the above mentioned planning meetings, and for their own separate agendas, established additional links with NGOs. For the first time, NGOs were represented on the Research Board of the Savanna Agricultural Research Institute (SARI). Researchers organised 'open days' for other actors as well, but especially for NGOs, to show what they were doing and receive suggestions as to how they could take their work further. Researchers became more active in organising workshops for NGOs to address issues relevant to a smooth research protocol. Fortnightly workshops were organised at village level to give backstopping. Over a cropping period of 4 months, 8 meetings were organised. NGOs in return were asked to lay-out and monitor some of the field trials, test out some of the technologies before they were finalised, and to identify and organise farmers for experiments. One vital role that NGOs played for research, was gathering information. Researchers asked

the NGOs to administer their questionnaires and conduct various forms of surveys for them.

NGOs

Suddenly, NGOs woke up to find themselves building and maintaining multi-stranded relationships with various institutions, and taking on other actors' agendas as well as their own. The traditional 'small area of operation' of the NGOs became extended out of all proportion, and methodologies had to be evolved to satisfy the new demands if they were still to be effective. Roles and relationships with farmers had to be re-defined, and farmer-to-farmer extension was seen as a possible and effective tool. Farmers were identified and trained to offer this service. For some technologies, key rural people were identified. It was realised that with a little training and guidance and help in laying out experimental plots, farmers could collect data. Four NGOs helped farmers to collect data for researchers in SARI, and this skill has since remained with the farmers, although not further developed. It took the form of a designed format to be completed by the farmers. NGOs had to re-organise their working committees and review workshops to include farmers. In TAAP, farmers gave us training sessions, for example, in the use of accessories in bullock training. We have plans to survey, identify and document rural people in order to form a 'Register of traditional/ indigenous resource persons'. When this is done, we will use the register to link people and institutions in need of such services with the relevant rural resource persons (Millar 1996). Thus far, we have expropriated their knowledge and skills.

We have not gone far in assessing how the new linkages are performing. But with a shift of 'farmers to the centre', conventional ways of assessing organisational linkages have to be modified by farmers' mechanisms for establishing links and sustenance. This needs conscious monitoring, development and documentation.



Robert Yakaba Abayom, farmer from Mufese, Northern Ghana explains how he understands the map of another village.

David Millar, TAAP, P.O. Box 42, Tamale N.H., Ghana.

References

- Hardter, K. 1989. Utilisation of nitrogen and phosphorus by intercropping and sole cropping systems. Nyanakpa Agriculture Experimental Station Research Report no. 5.
- Millar, D. 1996. Proposal for cosmovision research - A CCEK Programme (unpublished).
- MOFA. Medium Term Agricultural Development Programme 1991-2000 - An agenda for sustainable agricultural growth and development (unpublished).
- MOFA 1993. Summary of the Winneba orientation workshop on National Agricultural Extension Project (NAEP). (unpublished).