

Promoting Farmer Innovation

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The objective of the "Promoting Farmer Innovation" (PFI) programme is to help formulate a radically new research methodology, while demonstrating the developmental benefits of improved land husbandry in dry areas. The programme began in 1997 in Kenya (Mwingi District), Tanzania (Dodoma Region) and Uganda (Soroti, Kumi and Katakwi Districts).

PFI has been working to establish partnerships of governmental and non-governmental agencies that will focus on farmer innovation. The programme is managed by the UNSO-UNDP Office to Combat Desertification and Drought and is linked to the Governments' National Action Programmes (NAPS), which have been developed under their commitment to the Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD) (see *LEISA Newsletter* 16.1 pp 6-7). PFI has turned out to be a classic case of learning by doing and consists of tailored training accompanied by fieldwork. A "10 steps" framework (Figure 1) was drawn up to guide field activities.

First lessons

On-the-ground identification of farmer innovators (FIs) by extension workers was surprisingly quick and easy. Forming clusters of FIs has proved a good way of organising interaction between innovators and providing a focal point for activities. There is a growing awareness, however, of the potential problem of creating exclusive clubs of "favoured" farmers. PFI is not primarily a programme to help innovators themselves; it's about stimulating innovators to share ideas with their fellow farmers.

Another lesson from the field is that many innovations are already good enough, and attractive enough, to be spread. Other farmers quickly take up

these "best-bet" innovations. Thus, joint experimentation by farmers and researchers and adding value to innovations is not necessary in all cases. After all, farmers are the best judges of what is useful to them. If they find an original innovation interesting they will accept or modify it further themselves. Under PFI, certain innovations have spread rapidly (types of compost making; deep-pitting systems for planting sugar cane and cassava, etc) and have outstripped the programme's capacity to technically validate these techniques.

Documentation

A regional review workshop held in Dodoma, Tanzania, early last year in Dodoma, brought together policy makers, extensionists, researchers and innovators from all three countries. The issues debated and experiences analysed were captured in a book that has proved a remarkably useful awareness-raising tool and reference document on innovation. A professional video on the programme is serving the dual purpose of being a "virtual field visit" and raising awareness at all levels. English and French versions are currently in use; a Swahili version is being prepared.

Challenges ahead

There are immediate, and longer term, challenges for PFI:

- More attention should be given to *monitoring and evaluation* (M&E) at innovation level, and to develop such systems with farmers. M&E systems that both farmers and technical staff are comfortable with and that simultaneously yield user-friendly and functional data are not easy to design.
- The second main challenge is to bring *research agencies* more fully into the picture, to complete the farmer-extensionist-researcher triangle, and to strengthen the processes of innovation validation and joint experimentation.

- The third challenge, *impact assessment*, relies very much on the previous two. The impact of the programme must be assessed in the light of cost effectiveness.
- The fourth outstanding issue is how to *involve more women* (and youngsters) in the programme. Initially, there was a strong focus on male farmers. After a sequence of gender studies and sensitisation workshops, more innovations by women farmers were identified.
- Another set of challenges relate to investigating issues such as: *What stimulates "innovativeness" the best?* and *How can we enhance this process?* These are central to any innovator programme.

Institutionalisation

The ultimate challenge is institutionalisation, both through vertical integration into Government (and NGO) policy and by horizontal integration through partnerships on the ground. Institutionalisation is, encouragingly, well underway. For example in Kenya, PFI now has a formal alliance with FAO's Farmer Field Schools (FFS) programme, entitled "PFI-FFS". In Uganda, the FI methodology has been made explicit in the government's budget policy statement. In Tanzania, Dodoma's Regional Commissioner has given farmer innovators a key role to assist Government extension agents as resource persons. Institutionalisation, however, must be achieved in a non-threatening way: not by hard selling, but by gentle persuasion based on achievement and credibility. Harnessing and supporting farmer innovation is no panacea, but few can dispute its place in building a better and more productive rural environment. ■

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References

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 - **Promoting Farmers Innovation** (video 26 min. in English Swahili and French, USA\$15, inc postage) RELMA, PO Box 63403, Nairobi, Kenya; Fax: +254 2520762; Email: relma@cgiar.org; Internet: www.relma.org
- Book and video available from Lia de Groot, Resource Development Unit, CDCS-ICC, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, de Boelelaan 1115, 1081 HV Amsterdam

Figure 1 Ten Steps in the PFI Methodology

