



Engaging with farmers: Experiences from Africa RISING in the Ethiopian Highlands

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The Africa Research in Sustainable Intensification for the Next Generation (Africa RISING) program comprises three research-for-development projects supported by the United States Agency for International Development as part of the U.S. government's Feed the Future (FtF) initiative.

Through action research and development partnerships, Africa RISING will create opportunities for smallholder farm households to move out of hunger and poverty through sustainably intensified farming systems that improve food, nutrition, and income security, particularly for women and children, and conserve or enhance the natural resource base.

The three projects are led by the International Livestock Research Institute (in the Ethiopian Highlands) and the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (in West Africa and East and Southern Africa). The International Food Policy Research Institute leads an associated project on monitoring, evaluation, and impact assessment.



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Introduction

Africa RISING in the Ethiopian highlands is research for development project that is funded by USAID as part of the Feed the Future initiative. In Ethiopia, it is implemented in eight kebeles in four regions. The eight kebeles were selected on the basis of specific criteria including previous experiences of the partners, areas presenting opportunities for sustainable intensification, and sites undertaking crop, livestock, tree and natural resources management (NRM) activities.

Since 2012 the project engages quite a number of farmers (men, women and youth) in all the research processes including diagnosis, participation of different on-farm research trials, demonstration and evaluation, decision making and capacity building activities through different approaches. Figure 1 and the following will summarize farmers' engagement experience of the project in Ethiopian highlands.

Farmers engagement during diagnostic (system understanding) activities

Africa RISING project in Ethiopia devoted the first year of its project period for understanding the farming systems and communities by undertaking participatory assessments of the bio-physical and socio-economic issues in the crop-livestock-tree farming systems of its research sites. It was critical to do so for a project like Africa RISING that focuses on sustainable intensification which is taking in to account the whole farming system and the farmers. The main purpose of assessing and characterizing the farming systems and communities is to bring farmers to the center of the project research to play a role of telling their story, their farm and the system they are operating their day to day business including the markets, services, policy and institutions. These helped the project to identify key research thematic areas which were translated into a number of demand driven and integrated action research protocols through networks of interlinked Innovation Platforms (IPs). Although there are different approaches that can be used for understanding the key issues that hinder sustainable intensification, the project prefers to use the following participatory assessment tools/approaches to engage men and women farmers and local stakeholders for system understanding:

- Rapid telephone surveys
- Sustainable Livelihood Asset Evaluation (SLATE)
- Rapid market assessment
- Participatory community analysis (PCA)
- Agro-ecological knowledge toolkit
- IMPACTlite
- Value chain studies

The following methods were employed in all the research sites to approach and engage farmers:

- Focus group discussion with different groups of farmers (men, women and youth)
- Household survey for different diagnostic agendas that represent the population of the research sites (wealth groups, age, sex, leadership, geographic locations)
- On farm interview, nursery survey, telephone survey, feed calendar

The number of local partners from research centers, universities, government extension and administration departments and NGOs that have been partnering in each of the research site centrally trained to elicit and analyze local knowledge of farmers. This has helped the project team to identify thematic research areas for interventions. From the above listed participatory toolkits/approaches the number of local partners engaged in data collection during the PCA and SLATE only reached 60 from all of the four project sites and they have engaged a total of 900 farmers. The trained partners from the research sites have been the ones who collected information from the farmers and analyzed to characterize the farming systems and communities. They are members of the innovation platform networks established at woreda, Kebele and community level and play key roles in implementing the designed integrated interventions, demonstrations and communications. Most of the 900 farmers engaged in the two assessments and other farmers engaged in the rest of the participatory assessment tools and approaches have understood our project purposes and objectives. They have also owned the project and provided enormous information without hesitation.

Selection Processes of Participating Farmers

Two different approaches have been used to identify participating farmers in the different action research activities in the project. These approaches are:

a) Identifying interested farmers through presenting the research protocol idea and criteria to a number of farmers gathered in a meeting. After all farmers have awareness about the Africa RISING project during 2013 diagnosis phase and demonstration of participatory variety selection of wheat, potato and faba bean then farmers interest to participate have increased. In 2014 cropping season CGIAR centers have developed research protocols to implement based on the thematic areas identified and the project with its local partners organized community meeting to present the protocol in local languages and identify interested farmers to participate in the action research. A total of 33 action and exploratory research protocols produced and able to engage more than 700 hrs in all the four sites. An example on how we engaged farmers in technologies selection: Introduction of high value trees research protocol was presented by ICRAF to all invited farmers in each of the eight kebele. Then interested farmers who agreed on the criteria including access to irrigation water registered. The research team verified whether the farmers qualify to manage the intervention through various ways.

b) Before selecting farmers and implementing research activities, review of research protocols was done on innovation platform meetings organized at woreda strategic IP level. In 2015 cropping season all research protocols have been shared on the 3rd planning meeting of strategic IP for the sake of seeking feedbacks from local partners and farmers and contextualizing the research ideas to site specific problems. IP members consisting of researchers, extension workers, experts and farmers critically commented on each of the research protocols. As a result modifications were made to some of the protocols and few protocols were even not chosen to be implemented at some sites because they did not meet local requirements. Nearly 1000 households farmers were engaged in 2015 'meher' season action research.

Participating farmers in the project are well organized based on commodity they participate in which we call it '*innovation cluster*' or '*farmers' research and extension groups*'. These groups have been established in each kebele and they count up to nine groups. They are organized in groups for the following reasons:

- To create an opportunity for practical learning exercise among the farmers in each group on planting, managing and harvesting of the commodity they are working on;

- to be represented in decision making processes during innovation platform meeting at woreda and kebele level through their representatives;
- To create farmer to farmer extension for increasing the adoption of the technologies they are working on.

Principles, guidelines and standards when engaging farmers

There are a number of values Africa RISING is applying while engaging farmers and these can be summarized as follows:

- **Confidentiality:** those farmers who have been engaged in providing information have been informed about the project purpose and were told that all information they provided is confidential;
- **Building trust:** creating trust with farmers on the project is a must to create ownership-this is being achieved through respecting and engaging all groups of representatives of farmers in the whole project phases. There are cases when farmers were compensated for opportunity costs if for some reason the research commodity or treatment did not perform to the expected standard.
- **Respecting views and opinions:** farmers' views and opinions value while engaging on research, workshop and trainings. In fact in the IP, farmers have started practicing to tell their minds without any hesitation which was not the case in the conventional extension approach whereby each kebele is given quota to implement a certain technology or practice. In the IP/FRG farmers are free to modify, accept or reject a given technology or practice.
Value indigenous knowledge: farmers have a good reason on making their own decision in their livelihoods. A live example of valuing indigenous knowledge could be the case of 'Stepwise Intensification Options for Small-scale Faba Bean / Forage Production Systems' experiment. Farmers were observed weeding their faba bean plots late with the intention to allow volunteer weeds to grow with the crop. Farmers were interviewed to understand the underlying reason for their practice which is contrary to the 'improved' practice for faba bean field management which recommends frequent weeding of the crop. They explained the reason as feed shortage is so critical during the crop growth period (meher) when all possible grazing fields are cultivated and planted to crops and the crop residue store is depleted during that time of the year and hence they harvest the weed from crop fields at a later stage for livestock feeding. A tradeoff analysis between the traditional and improved practices proved that the opportunity costs associated with the loss in weed biomass due to the adoption of improved practices are not adequately offset by the economic gains from increased grain yield and crop residue biomass. As a result, it is recommended that researchers and development practitioners should consider indigenous knowledge and a broader systems approach and total plot productivity, rather than just the partial benefits (for instance from grain productivity gains) from specific plots of land under smallholder production systems.
- **Inclusive:** the project engages all groups of farmers (men, women, youth, wealth, influential, discriminated, poor and landless) during diagnosis and target most of them based on priorities;
- **Building their local capacity to innovate:** all participating farmers are grouped based on commodity as an innovation cluster/farmers research groups for strengthening their collaboration and information sharing in each research

- From each research groups or innovation clusters representatives are selected for kebele level operational level and woreda level strategic IPs for facilitating two ways communication and create iterative learning

Participation of farmers in different regular and non-regular events

Site specific farmers' field days: are organized every year in research sites to demonstrate the different on - farm research trials and participatory variety selection before harvest. As an approach the field day is organized one day a head of the strategic IP evaluation meeting to give a chance for members to see farmers' field. The farmers' field day is organized in the two research kebele sites in each woreda and participants include national level partners including research protocol leaders (CGIAR centers), all IP members from woreda and kebele, other non-participating farmers and local media. The main objective of the farmers' field day is to demonstrate research trials on farmers field for all participants to learn from the participating farmers and researchers involved. Farmers' field day is a big event of the project used for demonstrating all research activities and technologies performing on farmers' field. Almost all partners of the project have a chance to see what the project is introducing and how participating farmers are evaluating the various research undertakings. It is also a market place for development partners to identify technologies preferred by farmers for scaling up.

Innovation platform network: Farmers' representation (gender, sex, wealth) in each innovation platform is given due attention. We have innovation platform set up at three levels and the following explains how it is structured from bottom to up:

- **Innovation cluster/farmers research and extension groups:** in each research site the project is working with more than nine farmer research groups or innovation clusters established on commodity basis. This is to create learning and sharing within the group on each commodity. Almost all participants are farmers. Each group nominate its representative from men and women farmers. These representatives are members of the kebele operational IP and share the concern of their groups on the platform. Training on planting, management and utilization is given for each group on the crop, livestock and tree related research activities and also a practical training on handling machineries and other technologies is given for farmers.
- **Kebele operational IP:** more than half of the members are farmers representing all the different innovation clusters and the others are kebele level organizations represented for technical advises and mobilizing community on agreed research activities. Five members of each operational IP are nominated to be members of the woreda Strategic IP for sharing and learning processes between kebele and woreda level.
- **Woreda strategic IP:** The majority of the members of this IP are the representatives of woreda/district level institutions like Office of Agriculture (including DAs), all woreda level public sector offices, universities, research centers, administration office, private sector, microfinances, farmers and Africa RISING site coordinators. Farmers are represented by five members from each operational IP while other institutions are represented mostly by one member.

Engagement during implementation

After farmers are identified through such participatory and interactive process, researchers will proceed to research implementation phase. A mechanism was set up so that the very young innovation platforms, which have farmers as members, would start contributing on research implementation.

- The different research protocols are introduced to the IP members. Technical and resource related issues are discussed thoroughly before protocols are endorsed (this could go as far as totally changing research agenda!);
- After research proposals got the green light, a visit to intervention farmers is made to make sure if experimental plots/field are in accordance with the criteria (Biophysical, socio-economic) set for the implementation of each protocol (This could be related with land size, labor, access to water, soil type, slop etc.) ;
- A team of researchers, IP Technical group (TG) members, site coordinators and intervention farmers participate in this plot/site validation work.

During all this process we make sure that farmers' perspective contributes in making the design and implementation of the interventions demand driven. Meaning, we try to make sure that;

- The process is participatory enough and is open to dialogue and negotiation;
- There is a shared understanding on research objectives;
- Incentives are well aligned ;
- Power relations among different actors are well managed and brokered.

Participation in decision making

Farmers involve in decision making at different phases of research interventions. Their involvement can be categorized into three phases at; *Pre-implementation*, *implementation* and *post-implementation*. For this purpose we considered *implementation* as the stage where the actual experiment or action research is executed on the field. On pre-implementation phase, farmers engaged in identification of research problems, workability of proposed research and site/plot selection.

During the *implementation* phase, farmers are not only active participants but leaders of seasonal evaluations that are used to assess technology performance based on a set of criteria jointly developed by farmers and researchers. At this stage a decision is made on which technology to promote, what needs to be improved or what further research is needed.

On *post-implementation* phase, farmers are mainly involved in technology multiplication and pre-scaling/scaling up work. Decisions involved at this stage are more of social/institutional than technical. This called for joint engagement with local partners like district agricultural office, NGOs and FBOs (Farmers Based organizations) as opposed to involving only intervention farmers. We have down lesson that more work is needed in identifying niches and innovation networks to better engage farmers in the social/institutional decision making process.

To make sure that farmers are included in decision making processes, Africa RISING is using participatory research approaches and farmer engaging platforms.

	Phases		
	Pre-implementation	Implementation	Post-implementation
Major engagement platforms	A number of Participatory diagnostic studies (about 9!); Innovation clusters (FRGs)	Community level field evaluations (Mid and end season evaluation); Innovation clusters (FRGs); Strategic Innovation platforms; Operational Innovation platforms	Strategic Innovation platforms; Operational Innovation platforms; Innovation clusters; FBOs

Farmers' and actors involvement in Africa RISING

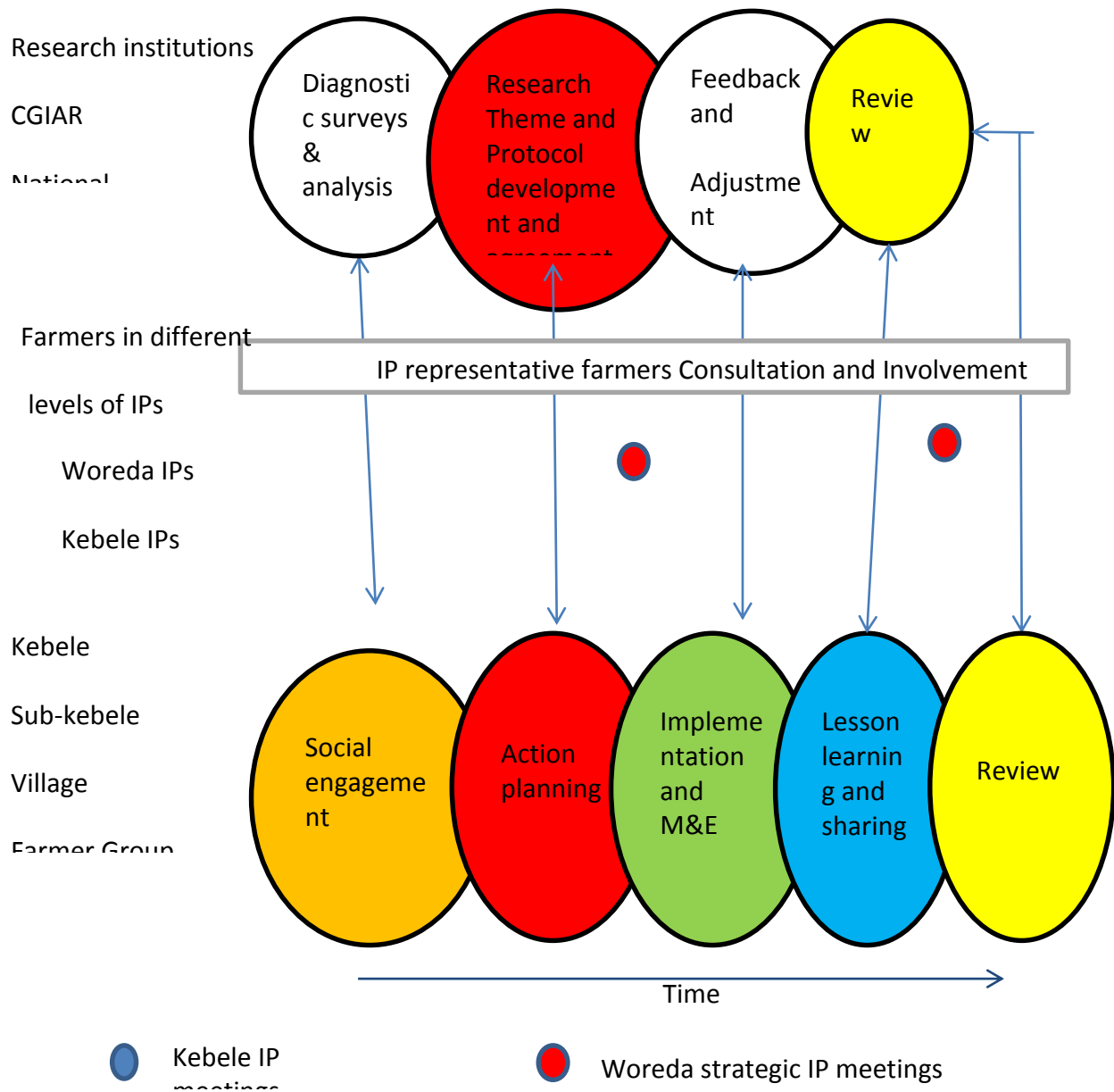


Figure 1. Engagement process diagram (Adopted from-Jim Ellis Johns, 2014)

Incentive mechanisms

Africa RISING project in the Ethiopian highlands has been using quite a few incentive mechanisms to make sure that long term community benefits will not be at stake because of insensitivity to short term expectations. The main incentives for farmers is to participate in action research (research trials) and community seed multiplication activities that include technological and technical inputs for the sustainable intensification activities on crop, livestock, tree and natural resource management activities. While other non-participating farmers have also access to farmers to farmers technology transfer by their active participation during demonstration on farmers' field days and evaluation of participatory variety selection. Some of the farmers have improved their feed utilization efficiency by constructing improved feed trough and feed storage facilities introduced by the project. Other incentives can be in the form of cash or in kind. The project has a guideline concerning payments for farmers and other local partners during participation of various events (Annex 1) including field days, experience sharing visits, trainings, workshops and survey activities. These events can be organized in places where farmers have to expend money for transportation and meal. In such cases Africa RISING makes sure that such farmers are compensated. When there is no expenditure, there is a strict policy of not paying money for farmers. Farmers also receive benefits such as inputs (fertilizers and seed) when they manage participatory varietal selection (PVS) trials. If they are managing community seed increase activities, the research team from concerned CGIAR center or local partners backstop on technical issues. In this case farmers purchase all the inputs.

Experience sharing events, trainings, our participatory research approaches and gender sensitivity are other forms of incentives that are helping Africa RISING in making farmers see the benefits of our research interventions.

Monitoring and evaluation

Apart from the program level monitoring and evaluation framework that is done by IFPRI, ILRI has set up its own [M&E framework](#) when it comes to farmers' and other actors' engagement in the research activities. By drawing a lesson from previous ILRI Research-for-Development projects, we are monitoring and evaluation actors' engagement process using a number of M&E tools that were developed using the KIDS (Keep it descriptive and simple!) approach. Through this framework farmers and local actors are involved in;

- Developing a quarterly action plan for the IP TG members;
- Monitor activities outlined on the action plan on IP meetings;
- Field visit, data collection and compilation on biophysical interventions;
- Assign M&E personnel that champions the M&E work and collect data on jointly identified indicators (change in actor linkages; actor representation, capacity development; IP contribution to research and process facilitation) ;
- Identification, record and selection of MSC (Most Significant Change) stories emerging from AR interventions.

Annex 1. Guidelines on payments to partners

The issue of payments to partners in projects like Africa RISING is a sensitive one.

There is a need to incentivise and remunerate partners for the efforts that they make on behalf of the project. However, it is essential that these payments (including in-kind contributions) are made in a way that is equitable across all partners and does not compromise the activities of other organisations by inflating the remuneration market. The situation with Africa RISING is complex as the project involves a relatively large number of CGIAR partner organisations (as well as local partners) who all have their own different rules and guidelines on such payments. This document defines some standard criteria for Africa RISING collaborators to follow when establishing payments to partners.

Who Might be Eligible for Payment?

The following categories of partners should be considered:

Farmer: Farmers participating in Africa RISING should receive some form of compensation for the time and effort that they dedicate to the project. Direct cash payments to farmers are not generally recommended as they can distort expectations and lead to friction amongst recipients and non-recipients. An exception to this might be where a farmer has resorted to public transport to attend a meeting or function at, for example, the Woreda headquarters. Any form of farmer contact should, generally, respect their status as equitable partners in the project and the nature and extent of any in-kind contributions should reflect this.

Development Agent and Kebele administrators: Levels of participation by DAs are likely to be variable across sites depending on capacity and levels of motivation. Where DAs are participating actively in Africa RISING's research activities, this should be recognised by some form of top-up payment. To some extent, this will have to be determined on an *ad hoc* basis with an agreed number of days being paid at a standard daily rate.

Woreda Official: Woreda and zonal experts and officials may participate actively in project activities, in which case they should be appropriately remunerated at the same level as participating researchers (see below). Sometimes, some woreda officials may request a "facilitation" payment for assigning their staff to Africa RISING activities, without actually participating in Africa RISING activities themselves. This is to be strongly discouraged. Site coordinators need to explain that such payments are not allowed under the Africa RISING project and would be unacceptable to our project auditors. Should these requests persist, site coordinators should refer them to the Africa RISING management team.

Researcher (University / Research Centre): All researchers participating in the project should be treated equally in terms of the remuneration that they receive. Site coordinators and other project staff will need to determine what is an appropriate level of participation and by whom in order to discourage the establishment of a development tourism industry around the project.

What Amount is Appropriate for each Type of Partner?

The following table suggests the level of remuneration that is appropriate for a particular activity:

Recipient / Activity	
Farmer	
Participation in survey / PRA interview etc.	Payment should be in kind (farm implements that cost not more than 50 birr).
Participation in on-farm research field-day events	Refreshment (soft drinks and cookies)
Participating in trainings, workshops	If the training and the workshop are conducted in the kebele, the participants will be provided with lunch allowance of birr 50 per day. If the training and workshop are conducted outside the kebele farmers will be provided per-diem and accommodation that amounts to 200 birr per day.
Travel Expenses	Reimbursement for transport will be based on receipt
Development Agent	
Participation in on-farm research activities (monitoring, advice delivery etc.)	Lunch allowance of 135 birr as per ILRI rate (current rate is 30% of 450 birr= 135 birr).
Accompanying researchers during field visit	Lunch allowance of 135 birr as per ILRI rate (current rate is 30% of 450 birr= 135 birr).
Participating / facilitating site or kebele level meetings	Lunch allowance of 135 birr as per ILRI rate (current rate is 30% of 450 birr= 135 birr).
Participating in trainings, workshops	If the training and the workshop are conducted in the kebele, the development agent will be provided with lunch allowance of birr 135 per day. If the training and workshop are conducted outside the kebele, the DA/s will be provided per-diem and accommodation that amounts to 400 birr per day.
Travel expenses	Reimbursement for transport will be based on receipt
Woreda Official	
Participation in project meeting / workshop	If the training, meeting and the workshop are conducted in the kebele or in the woreda town where they come from, the officials/experts will be provided with lunch allowance of birr 135 per day. Group lunch can be arranged depending on the circumstances. Coffee and tea health breaks can be managed by the training, workshop and meeting organizers.

Field visit	Lunch allowance of 135 birr as per ILRI rate (current rate is 30% of 450 birr= 135 birr).
Travel expenses	Reimbursement for transport will be based on receipt
Participation in project level meeting (e.g. in Addis Ababa)	ILRI per-diem rate + accommodation
Researcher (University / Research Centre)	
Participation in project meeting / workshop	If the event takes place in the residence town, lunch allowance will be provided (135 birr). If conducted outside the residence town, they will be provided per-diem as per ILRI rate + accommodation.
Field visit	If the event takes place in the residence town, lunch allowance will be provided (135 birr). If conducted outside the residence town, they will be provided per-diem as per ILRI rate + accommodation.
Participating in extensive field studies/surveys	ILRI per-diem rate for all + accommodation if they spent night/s outside residence town.
Travel expenses	Reimbursement for transport will be based on receipt
Participation in project level meeting (e.g. in Addis Ababa)	ILRI per-diem rate + accommodation