Strengthening Participatory Research Approaches in Ethiopia: A Conversation with Abra Adamo

2000-09-21

John Eberlee

[Abra Adamo](#) *is a research fellow with the* [International Center for Tropical Agriculture](#) *(CIAT). From May 1999 until May 2000, Ms. Adamo worked with the Ethiopian Agricultural Research Organization on the Participatory Research for Improved Agro-Ecosystem Management (PRIAM) project, a multi-country initiative launched by CIAT and the Rockefeller Foundation. Her role was to document the participatory research experiences of communities and national research institutions at one or more of the PRIAM project sites in Ethiopia.*

Based on her field work, Ms. Adamo concluded that the PRIAM project is a success due to the impressive nature and level of farmers' involvement in the participatory research process and the collaborative relationship between PRIAM researchers and participating farmers. However, she found that the project lacked the mechanisms necessary to ensure the sharing of research results more broadly with the surrounding community. This was partly due to unexamined assumptions about the relationship between participating farmers and their 'community', and a failure to ensure that participating farmers were representative of all of the different categories of farmers as well as the range of different social networks to which Ethiopians belong within and across local communities. Her findings offer lessons for research institutions and donor agencies involved in 'community-based participatory research'. IDRC Reports Online *recently spoke with Abra Adamo about her research*:

Q) Can you tell me about the PRIAM project?

A) It started operating in 1997. CIAT Africa took on PRIAM as a way to work with its partners to identify how to modify their work to improve the results. The basic problem is that a lot of national research centres have very low technology adoption rates. The idea was to start sensitizing national researchers about the benefits of integrating farmers into their work in a more meaningful way. Often, what happens in the national research system is that scientists generate technologies without ever asking farmers as the end-users of those technologies: 'What would you like? What are your needs? What are your problems?' In Ethiopia, the farmers at two of the four research sites were primarily interested in agricultural implements. The purpose of the PRIAM project, therefore, has been to integrate farmers and communities into the technology development process as a way of ensuring that the technologies developed by national and international research institutions are more appropriate to the needs and interests of different farmers and to ensure that the research process itself is sustainable.

Q) What are the main strengths and accomplishments of the PRIAM project?

A) There are some thoroughly impressive strengths. The most significant one I witnessed was the kind and level of contribution that farmers made to the research process. Melesse Temesgen, an engineer with the Ethiopian Agricultural Research Organization (EARO), developed some agricultural implements that functioned as attachments to the indigenous wooden 'maresha' plough.

For example, he developed ploughs for shallow digging, to reduce soil moisture loss in areas characterized by persistent moisture stress. Planters were developed as attachments to the maresha to enable farmers to plant in rows as opposed to broadcasting, a practice which is now becoming an integrated part of their local farming system. That has had a dramatic impact on farmer's yields, incomes, and on the farming system as a whole.

Melesse would literally go to the field three or four times a week to enable and encourage the farmers to test his ideas. He would say, 'What do you think? How does it feel? Is it working like you want it to?' And the farmers would immediately give suggestions and recommendations: 'This doesn't dig deep enough', or 'It's too heavy and my oxen are tired', etc. Melesse would then go back to his lab and make the modifications and bring back a newer version of the plough within weeks. There was a constant feedback between researcher and farmer, and there was a lot of respect for the farmers' knowledge, expertise, and experience. Melesse said that these technologies would never have become the useful and appropriate implements that they are had farmers not been involved.

Through that close collaboration, the farmers have a much stronger sense of themselves, their own capacities, and their own knowledge. As a result, there's now a strong sense of empowerment demonstrated locally, for example, through their relationship with extension workers: 'We don't like the seed variety that you have given us. We want that one.' With the legitimation of farmer's knowledge and participation in technology development, farmers are willing to make claims on the formal research and extension system that they would not have made in the past.

Q) How representative of their own communities were the farmers who were chosen for this project?

A) In participatory research, this is such an important question. That was one of the first things I looked at: 'How were the farmers selected? Were there specific criteria involved? Did they represent different wealth categories, gender categories, ethnic categories, etc.?' But such criteria were not included in the selection process. Perhaps the national researchers assumed that if you select farmers from a community, they necessarily represent their community. I don't think they considered how to select farmers or how to represent different categories of people. Fortunately, at the two sites where I worked, when I did a wealth-ranking analysis, the farmers did represent fairly evenly the different categories of wealth that exist locally. But this was completely by chance.

One lesson for EARO is that in future, there is a need to consider how the farmers are selected, and who does the selecting, because this was completely a researcher- and extension-driven selection process. Farmers were not participating in the selection process. To some extent, there has to be participation in all levels of decision making.

Q) You identified some problems with PRIAM's 'community-based approach'. For example, I understand the concept of 'community' was somewhat foreign to the Ethiopian experience?

A) Yes. As soon as I got there, I started to realize that the concept didn't really make sense in the social and cultural context of the two PRIAM sites outside of Nazret. There was nothing locally that 'reeked' of a 'community'. I never saw a community meeting. I never saw community activities — nothing that implied village residents come together as one unified group. My suspicions were confirmed during my analysis of the activities and achievements of the farmer-research group within PRIAM. For the most part, they worked very well together, again because of how they were selected: they were friends. Many were family. At least one of the groups was very internally cohesive and achieved a lot. But I realized that the group had no clear idea of what their role was, vis-a-vis the community.

So I began to speak with researchers to find out what discussions they had about community when they set up the farmer group. Both farmers and researchers said that the issue never came up. Their main focus was the experiments that were going to be done, the technologies that were going to be tested, and how they would work together as a group. There was little discussion and attention to: 'What is the community? Where are they? Who are they? How do we integrate them? When do we integrate them? Do we integrate them into all activities or just some?' At this point, I wanted to know the community's impressions of the farmer-research group, and what they knew of the project. But I learned the community had little knowledge of their role within the project.

So there is a difficulty with the 'community' concept, and my questions became: 'What do we do about this? To what extent is this creating more difficulties then benefits? What concepts may be more appropriate to use?' and 'What bases of social organization may be more useful to use as a means of intervention?' For example, can you disseminate research results through farmers' social networks that reflect their day-to-day relationships?

Q) In other words, you could create a farmers-research group that is not a self contained community in itself but rather is representative of the farmers' networks that exist within the village, in order to disseminate new technologies more broadly?

A) This is it. If you only focus on a community, whether that community 'exists' or not, you may only have impact at the community level. Whereas with these farmers' networks, by their nature, which to some extent include people from different villages, you have a lot more potential for the actual dissemination of technologies, of information, of adoption, at different scales etc.

Q) Would you recommend that, prior to the beginning of a participatory research project, the research team conduct a study of community dynamics to identify the social networks?

A) Absolutely. I think it's critical that some level of social analysis is done, not just prior to the selection of farmers, but prior to developing your whole idea of what the project will be, because it bears so heavily on the output of that research. You can do this through various social network mapping tools, but also — and perhaps more importantly — through general discussions with people: you talk to farmers, you ask them who they work with, who they celebrate with, who they trust. You can get very clear ideas about these things without a lot of intensive work, although the more effort that's put into it the better the understanding of local social relations.

I realize that researchers often don't have a lot of time. And, in many cases within the national research centres, they don't have a lot of capacity in social research. So this is both a social analysis issue and a capacity building issue, at some level, for the partner institutions.

The question now is how to address this issue. Participatory research is a fundamentally different approach to the conventional research method. It's not just a struggle conceptually but also methodologically. Capacity building is important. What is also required is the integration of social science researchers into the research centres and drawing links, to make clear — through case studies, for example — why these social analyses are critical at all stages of a project's lifecycle.

For more information:

Abra Adamo, Research Assistant to the Director General, CIAT, A.A. 6713, Cali, Colombia; Tel: (57-2) 445-0087 or USA Direct satellite link: (650) 833-6625, ext. 3087; Fax: (57-2) 445-0099, 445-0073 or USA Direct satellite fax: (650) 833-6626; Email: a.adamo@cgiar.org or abraadamo@yahoo.ca

---

Links to explore ...

Accounting for Gender in Participatory Agricultural Research, by Gerry Toomey

Farmers as Researchers: The Rise of Participatory Plant Breeding, by Gerry Toomey