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Social Learning in Regional R&D Programs



Site team members from Areka Agricultural Research Centre plan for watershed exploration, where the most pressing NRM issues facing communities are diagnosed. As the last site to initiate this activity, the site team benefited from questions and methods developed in other sites yet adapted them to local realities in Areka.

AHI has worked to develop a flexible yet rigorous research and development process grounded in bottom-up learning and innovation as well as regional coordination and mentoring.

Regional research and development (R&D) programs are faced with a challenging mandate of balancing diverse tasks:

- ✓ Enabling bottom-up learning while integrating research regionally,
- ✓ Generating a flexible learning culture at all levels while ensuring research quality,
- ✓ Developing a mentoring system in which mentors are also learning, and
- ✓ Enabling change at local, site and regional levels when each level believes its task is to bring about change at other levels.

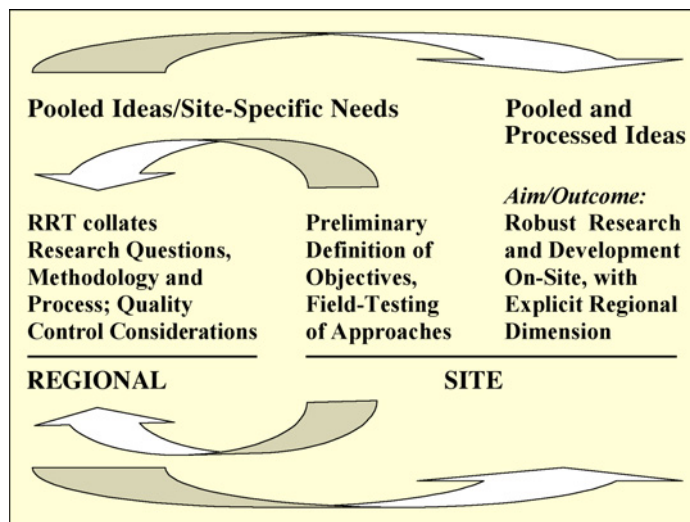
AHI has made recent progress in operationalizing a regional R&D agenda that is at once rigorous and flexible, bottom-up and regionally integrated. This brief outlines some of the lessons learned.

Approach Development: The Evolution of Public Goods

One of the biggest challenges in AHI is to foster a bottom-up learning process at site level (to generate and test new approaches) without losing the centralized coordination required to integrate findings at regional level. In AHI, interdisciplinary site teams composed of national R&D actors work with members of a regional research team (RRT) to develop approaches through joint dialogue and implementation.

The approach follows a sequence of steps. Ideas first emerge through site-level brainstorming with “gap facilitation” by RRT members who are chosen strategically to fill critical gaps in site team expertise (social science, systems ecology, etc.). As RRT members travel to new sites, site-specific

ideas and realities are integrated with the outcomes of deliberations in other sites. After one iteration, a preliminary regional synthesis of experiences (research questions, methods, insights) by the RRT is carried out and brought back to site level for scrutiny. This site-level feedback enables cross-fertilization among sites and peer



review. Newly synthesized ideas are scrutinized at site level and field-tested prior to more widespread application. Cross-site synthesis of experiences following this second iteration leads to the generation of public goods, including regional syntheses of approaches (facilitation techniques, research methods), lessons and findings.

Site Learning through Application: The Action Learning Guide

The above process was facilitated by a simple framework that assisted in planning development processes or research methods at site level. The framework is broken down into 4 discrete steps (Box 1). At each major new step of the R&D process, the team plans their actions by clarifying Objectives (*What are we trying to achieve?*) and Approaches (*What steps will be taken to achieve the objective and why?*).

Following field-testing of the approach or methodology, a reflection session is held in which observations are shared and the approach is modified for improvements. In addition to discussing how the approach was modified during its application, Successes (*What went well?*) and Challenges (*What were the stumbling blocks? Why did they occur?*) in applying the approach are discussed. Major Insights are then highlighted through open discussions (*What surprised you when you carried out this activity? What lessons can be derived?*). It is important to note that the tendency is to emphasize insights on findings (i.e., views and decisions of communities) rather than

BOX 1: Action Learning Guide

A. Prior to any new step

- ✓ Objectives
- ✓ Approach

B. Field-testing approach/methodology

C. Following each new step

- ✓ Changes in approach
- ✓ Successes and challenges
- ✓ Insights (on process, findings)

D. Prior to further implementation

- ✓ Recommendations

on the approach itself. Joint reflections must emphasize both, particularly when the regional program seeks to develop and disseminate working approaches for R&D. Finally, prior to full implementation of the development or research agenda, Recommendations are made for improving upon the approach based on observations-in-practice (*What would be done the same and differently next time?*). By developing approaches through a collaborative action learning mode, mutual learning occurs through joint dialogue and implementation, and program implementers (site teams, communities) gain working knowledge that is more useful than that derived from the “classroom.” Two case studies illustrate the merits of this approach.

Case #1: Generating Regional Research Questions

Iterative development of research questions can improve the quality of regional research. In a recent effort to develop approaches for participatory watershed diagnosis, RRT members met first with the Tanzanian site team to develop questions that could help to elicit the primary concerns of watershed residents. The site team

chose to elicit “problems that could benefit from collective action.” The RRT next visited the Ginchi site team (Ethiopia), who instead wanted to identify watershed issues by asking how “land management practices of neighbouring farmers or villages affect livelihoods.” Other site teams chose still different ways of eliciting watershed problems, emphasizing “natural resource conflicts” and “problems associated with common property resources.” When analyzing questions and responses regionally, it became clear how the framing of questions directly influenced farmers’ responses. The RRT then returned to site level with a recommendation to integrate diverse questions into a single interview protocol for a more robust watershed diagnosis. This case demonstrates the value of cross-fertilization and regional synthesis in enhancing R&D quality at all levels.

Case #2: Approach Development for Agricultural R&D

The second case demonstrates the utility of field-based action learning in the development of new approaches to agricultural development. During a regional workshop, preliminary steps of a participatory watershed management approach were developed by site and regional teams. First steps involved: 1) preliminary delineation of the area of influence, 2) exploration of watershed issues and opportunities, and 3) further analysis of identified issues. As site teams worked to operationalize the approach with watershed communities, several gaps emerged. First, the large number of identified watershed issues required an intermediary step between 2 and 3. Identified issues had to be prioritized by local residents to derive a manageable list of priority issues, and then “clustered” into functionally-linked groups of issues (i.e., water-soil-tree interactions). Secondly, the time required to finalize these steps led farmers to demand more immediate benefits. “Entry points” including cross-site visits, technology dissemination and immediate work on watershed issues of high priority (i.e., spring development) were therefore introduced. This modification led to consideration of how a more effective balance between formal inquiry and concrete actions could be achieved. This case illustrates the critical role of field implementation and reflection in the development of working approaches.

—Laura German and Ann Stroud



“Gap Facilitation”: RRT members facilitate site-level development of research questions and approaches, learning from site teams through joint reflection and implementation while bringing in new perspectives.



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