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Feedback seminars as tool to contextualise research findings in low external input systems

Introduction

Results of scientific research - particularly on low external input systems - still rarely find their way back into the communities whence they originate, and even if they finally do, are often perceived incomprehensible or irrelevant by the members of the target group.

Feedback seminars are group discussions, during which research findings are presented, discussed and reflected with the farmers involved in the study. They serve to further refine the mutual understanding of the subject under investigation through exchange and reflection on the research by different "experts".

"Without a context, a word or an action does not have a meaning" (Bateson, 1987)

"Something gains a meaning because of having an inner pattern and … being part of a bigger patterned context" (Bateson, 1983)

Scientific research particularly in societies without formal education must create "a bridge between two contexts" – the "scientific" and the "practical" farming context. Scientific results must have a meaning in both contexts.

	"Scientist"	"Farmer"
Context	determined by scientific discipline and research community, e.g. formal criteria for scientific methodology	determined by bio-geophysical, economic, political, socio-cultural "farming environment"
Inner pattern	Evident, created through data collection and analysis	Obscure, unless data collection and processing explained
Connection to bigger pattern	Through relating results to other studies in similar environments or using similar methods, i.e.: relating to scientific context	Through relating results to practical farming aspects of problems perceived by the farmer i.e.: relating to farming context

Above: Analogy sand/salt to convey that salt fed to livestock – though apparently homogenous – may vary in composition

Left: Stepwise visualised translation of quantitative data from participatory studies into scientific charts

Challenges

- Scientists often have double role as "facilitator and scientist" (hence must moderate group discussion and present topic, answer questions, argue).
- It is the scientist who must bridge the difference between the scientific problem and the practical farming problem.
- Scientists' often lack practical farming experience related to the study, hence fear being judged incompetent by the farmers.
- Presenting scientific methods and results understandably to heterogeneous groups of participants (different knowledge levels – often without formal education) is difficult.
- Research projects might create false expectations - particularly when addressing practical farming problems, as they rarely comprise implementation activities.
- Scientists must be familiar with socio-cultural rules to respect participants' customs.

Possible solutions

- External moderator can relieve burden of "double role" - however, must be familiar with scientists' and farmers' respective context.
- Research teams should include members of the target (or neighbouring) communities, who are rooted in the practical farming context and have a formal education.
- Scientists need facilitation skills to permit respectful and constructive dialogue with the seminar participants and stimulate, guide and end discussions, encourage participants to challenge the results and to claim missing information.
- Seminar structure must be clear, modular, and allow for ample discussion time (participants' contribution) and breaks.
- Results must be presented clearly, well structured (possibly modular) and following the farmers' way of reasoning. A trained community member (cf. above) should be consulted as to what and how to be presented (didactics - methodology).
- Scientists need knowledge on science theory to reflect scientific methods and ways results are deduced in order to convey an understanding to the farmers.
- Research set-up incl. budget should allow for initialisation of farmer driven trials and implementation activities (e.g. community funds).

Seminar methodology

Ideally, feedback seminars are held at the end of every fieldwork period after preliminary analysis of the data collected. Systematic structure may be adopted from scientific presentations, but must be adjusted to farmers' experience.

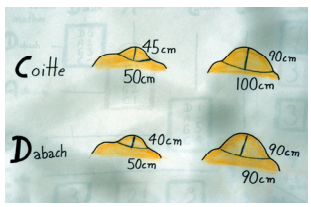
Introduction … must contextualise the importance of "the research question" to the farmers - hence scientists need to adopt the farmers view on the subject.

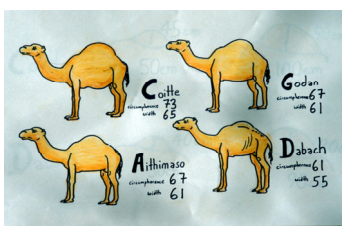
Material and methods … must detail data collection (when, where, why, which, how, how often, how much/many, how long) so that farmers can judge validity and "representativity" in their own context and argue whether all relevant factors are considered. Every day life analogies help to explain methods unknown to farmers, particularly when the research uses observation techniques beyond farmers experience (e.g. laboratory analysis).

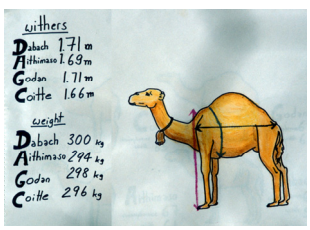
Results … must comprehensibly visualise research findings e.g. express quantitative results in familiar measuring units or introduce scientific diagrams by stepwise "transvisualisation".

Discussion … must challenge farmers to interpret the results with regard to farmers' context, perceived problems and envisaged solutions in order to assess the results' meaning.

Documentation … of feedback seminars should be tape recorded, transcribed and ex-post analysed (text analysis tools) to adequately incorporate farmers' feedback.







This work is based on feedback seminars held since 1994 in a succession of research projects among Rendille and Gabra pastoralists in North Kenya (Kaufmann 1998, Hülsebusch and Kaufmann 2002, Adams 2002, Aloo 2003, Grund 2004, Maritz 2004).

Lessons learned

Scientist contextualise research findings and meet farmers' interest
Farmers involved in research showed a keen interest in the scientific results.
Results presented stimulated in-depth discussions on the subjects under study.
Farmers appreciated immediate research feedback– also as compensation for their contribution to the study - and felt recognised as recipients of research findings.
Farmers learnt about:

- what scientists take home and could comment it,
- results obtained by observation methods beyond their reach,
- how to compare own observations with results from a wider context exceeding their own observation range,
- results based on aggregating quantitative data, hence providing additional evaluation options.

Farmers contextualise research findings and improve scientists' understanding
Farmers provided:

- additional information, specifically to clarify issues that were not clear in detail or misunderstood by scientists, or on important factors overlooked.
- their interpretation of the results and hence feedback on the meaning of the research findings in the local context.

Contextualising research findings is particularly important in low external input systems, since these depend on and need adjusting to the bio-geophysical, economic, political, and socio-cultural conditions. Feedback seminars let farmers take part in the negotiation of meaning of research findings.

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