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Making room for feedback: operationalising transdisciplinary research with pastoralist communities in Kenya and Namibia

MARIA RESTREPO¹, FELISTA TIMADO², RAPHAEL GUDERE^{1,2}, MPULE KAMWI³, MAREIKE AUFDERHEIDE-VOIGTS³, HUSSEIN WARIO², BRIGITTE KAUFMANN¹

¹*German Institute for Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture (DITSL), Germany*

²*Center for Research and Development in Drylands (CRDD), Kenya*

³*Namibia Nature Foundation, Sustainable Agriculture, Namibia*

Abstract

Transdisciplinary research (TDR) is increasingly recognised for its potential to address complex societal challenges through a close collaboration between scientists and societal stakeholders. It involves a process of knowledge integration, co-creation and application. However, collaboration at eye level requires more than stakeholder presence; it involves negotiating influence and control, ensuring shared decision-making. One element is creating a platform where feedback from local actors can be expressed, heard, and acted upon. This study explores how institutionalising the collaboration and providing a regular space for community-led feedback shapes the research process, and how communication strategies influence the effectiveness of this feedback.

The research was conducted within the InfoRange project in Kenya (Marsabit County) and Namibia (Kavango East and Omaheke regions), involving collaboration between early-career researchers and pastoralist communities. To institutionalise the collaboration, fourteen community committees were established, composed of herders, livestock owners, and traditional authorities proposed and appointed by the communities. Regular committee meetings provided a platform for dialogue, where early-career researchers presented their work and received feedback. Thematic analysis of qualitative data, including eight interviews with early-career researchers, ten with committee members, recording of meetings and quarterly reports, was conducted to identify patterns and generate insights.

Consortium partners documented 30 committee meetings in 2024 and 4 in the first quarter of 2025, during which early-career researchers presented their data collection plans or preliminary results. Findings show that committee feedback influenced different aspects of the research process, including decisions on participant selection for specific topics, adaptation of data collection tools to local context, and interpretation of and conclusions from findings. Interactive demonstrations with data collection tools sparked discussions about data use and ownership, privacy, and consent. The effectiveness of feedback was closely linked to both researchers' communication approaches, supported by the use of visual tools, analogies, and reflective spaces that fostered open and critical dialogue.

This study demonstrates that community feedback, when actively supported by inclusive and accessible communication, can meaningfully shape TDR processes. It is not an add-on but a core methodological element that enables power-sharing, and enhances the relevance and legitimacy of research outcomes.

Keywords: Co-creation, communication practices, community feedback, power-sharing, transdisciplinary research