

Creating a community of champions

Getting more research into practice in eastern and central Africa



***'The knowledge required for sub-Saharan Africa to achieve its own green revolution is not lacking, what is lacking as ever, is the will to turn this knowledge into practice.'* This well known quote from the UN Secretary-General in 2004 recognises that for decades agricultural research has had limited impact on the livelihoods of rural people in sub-Saharan Africa. Why is this so – what are the barriers that stop good research being promoted and turned into useful information and technologies that can benefit the rural poor? Researchers in eastern and central Africa suggest that a radical change in the culture of research organisations is needed to put more emphasis on uptake promotion. Their approach is to build 'a community of champions'.**

Researchers are willing but...

Most natural resources researchers set out with the intention of improving the livelihoods of poor people but unfortunately they give little thought to how this will actually be achieved in practice. They tend to follow a linear path from the development of technology and new practices to writing papers and reports often aimed at a limited audience. Reporting usually takes place in the final stages of a project when it is winding down and so there is little time, and often little incentive, for researchers to communicate their findings to the very people and organisations that are supposed to benefit from them.

In eastern and central Africa (ECA), one of the roles of the Soil and Water Management Research Network (SWMnet) is to promote and disseminate the findings of soil and water management research. SWMnet is one of the networks of the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa (ASARECA) – an organisation of the national agricultural research systems (NARS) of ten ECA countries. But there was a realisation that SWMnet is unable to meet its objectives without wholesale changes in the prevailing and constraining culture among researchers and their organisations.

Changing research culture

It was against this background that SWMnet undertook a research project to examine the main constraints and barriers to changing the research culture, to raise awareness of the issues among research managers, and to improve the capacity and skills of researchers. The research was based on two important assertions. The first was that despite the prevailing culture, researchers were still the most obvious and able people to prospect for knowledge and technologies and were well placed to promote their uptake – building on what was available was preferable to building something new. The second was that concentrating initially on existing knowledge and technologies rather than on future research could be a faster way of achieving the desired impact.

Hopefully the time is coming when the UN Secretary General's comment will be redundant



The plan was to create ‘a community of champions’ that would provide a focus for communicating and promoting the uptake of research findings and ensuring they were put to practical use.

Constraints and barriers

SWMnet undertook studies in four ASARECA member countries – Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Tanzania – to evaluate major constraints and barriers to change. The results confirmed the generally perceived wisdom about agricultural research:

- Government policy and strategy documents stress the importance of agricultural research findings reaching farmers. But this focus can be too narrow and ignores the many other actors who play important roles in the uptake process. They include policy-makers, financing institutions, manufacturers, agro-entrepreneurs, extension service staff, farmers, and business people involved in both input and output markets. All these different actors look at the same issues but in different ways. They focus on what is important to them and to their own decision-making. Each needs information about the same topics but presented in different ways so that each can understand it from their point of view and act upon it – the government minister and the farmer both need to know about new findings for soil and water management but each will need the information presented in very different ways. This goes beyond the traditional role of communicating research findings to the extension workers and farmers. The challenge is to find ways of informing everyone so that each can play their part.
- Research organisations do not generally recognise their potential role in uptake promotion. Most still see their main role is to provide information to farmers via an extension service. A consequence of this is that the time and money allocated to communication and uptake promotion is relatively small compared with that committed to field work, data

analysis and reporting (see figure). At most 30 percent of researchers’ efforts were spent on sharing knowledge and the least time and funds were allocated to advising clients.

- The majority of researchers are not adequately trained for communication and uptake promotion. Researchers consider this to be one of the main reasons why they do not readily engage in these activities.
- Incentives for researchers such as salary increases, promotion and prizes are awarded on the basis of research work undertaken and reports and papers published. This does not include assessments of how well their work was promoted and the impact it has had on farming. But changing this system is fraught with difficulties. It would be difficult to attribute and assess the impact on farming practices and livelihoods of specific research work and the role of individual researchers, and to develop a system of rewards that recognises the links between them.

Reaching stakeholders

Once the project researchers had these findings, the next step was to communicate them to persons holding key posts in a range of organisations with the aim of making them aware of the findings and to advocate changes. Five main stakeholder groups were identified:

- *Ministers and directors of general planning in ministries responsible for agriculture, rural development, natural resources management, and research* – to mobilise support for the implementation of the policy frameworks which are supportive of uptake promotion and scaling-up.
- *National agricultural research departments, organisations and institutes* – to influence both researchers and research managers in order to increase funding for uptake promotion in research projects.
- *Universities* – similarly to increase funding for uptake promotion in research but additionally to influence the attitude of students who might go on to become researchers in the future.

- *Public extension services* – to promote new thinking about the role of extension beyond the established research-extension-farmer linkages.
- *ASARECA and international research organisations* – to influence decision-making and strategic planning at an international and regional level.

In order to achieve the engagement of these various stakeholders, the project developed and then implemented its communication plan. A range of communication methods and media were used including:

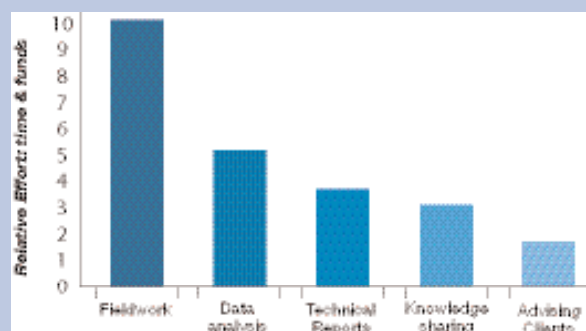
- Workshops, meetings and face-to-face discussions
- An awareness raising film produced on DVD and video
- Technical pamphlets
- Posters produced in the four important languages of ASARECA – English, French, Arabic, and Swahili
- Computer-based presentation packages
- A CD compilation of reference materials, including those of NRSP.

Developing the champions

This work is beginning to stimulate institutional change both nationally and regionally. Already the project's communications plan has been adopted by several organisations in the region as a template. Most notably ASARECA and consequently its partner NARS have decided that an uptake promotion strategy with a well prepared communication plan are high priority criteria for appraising, monitoring and evaluating research projects.

In all some 800 stakeholders in the ECA region were reached during the course of the project. The awareness raising and capacity building has created 'a community of champions' of over 250 professionals who are now trained and able to work as advocates for how best to ensure that research will be put into practice. Evidence is now emerging that new research plans across the whole region contain uptake promotion strategies with the key component of robust (multi-stakeholder) communication plans. Materials produced by the project are becoming a main reference source for those planning new research projects.

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Relative allocation of time and funds for different stages along the research to utilisation chain.

The Association for Strengthening Research in Eastern and Central Africa (ASARECA) is a non-political organisation of the national agricultural research systems (NARS) of ten countries: Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. It operates 17 networks and programmes including SWMnet.

R8381 Institutionalised scaling-up and uptake promotion of outputs from soil and water management research in east and central Africa

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