

**Participatory Agricultural Research: Approaches, Design and Evaluation**  
**Oxford, 9-13 December 2013**

**Opening Keynote**

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Development implies progress, of a sort that we can assess, largely technologically driven. 'Progress' is a largely Western concept of "change for the better", which many Euro-Americans assume to be universal. Development discourse expresses this material-related perspective in terms of economic measures to reduce poverty.

Whatever the criticisms of development in this materialistic sense, and they are many, it is the only way that we can legitimately talk about progress and is the basis on which we 'objectively' measure such changes. It is arguably the only way that we might morally justify 'intervening' in the lives of others. If we have nothing to offer in this technological sense (e.g. improve 'food security'), what are we doing, unless it is, as some commentators suggest, furthering exploitative relations?

This development as progress view informs the activities of agencies such as the CGIAR Centres that seek to intervene and promote what they consider positive change. It commonly takes the form of top-down interventions for 'modernisation', a theory that has characterised these activities since colonial times, and continue to this day, albeit often under participatory guises.

***Technology not culturally neutral***

Technology is not culturally neutral; any change will have social implications, often difficult to foresee. Seeking to change social arrangements is not so defensible or measurable. Examples would be encouraging profit-seeking market arrangements because they are deemed to be more 'efficient' at utilising available resources, or interfering in political structures because they are judged to be undemocratic.

Here is an enduring source of confusion about development. Natural resources are objective phenomena 'out there', about which we can reach some agreement using our shared sensory experiences. We can agree objective measures (e.g. higher yields per hectare) and talk of progress with respect to these measures.

The social implications go beyond such assessment, because 'well being' is informed by socio-cultural expectations and is a subjective phenomenon that exists 'in here' in our minds and features abstract ideas and emotions. How can we measure changes in values in terms of progress, except on personal grounds that 'my culture' and life experiences prompt me to think 'mine' are better than others?

***Socio-cultural variation precludes generic solutions***

The socio-cultural acceptability of any planned intervention, which the top-down techno-economic approach tends to overlook, is a central issue and highlights a major challenge. Socio-cultural responses to interventions vary from one region to another. This is a problem in development contexts where 'experts' expect to apply generic solutions to problems, such as integrated rural development, structural adjustment, and sustainable livelihoods in the form of technological and economic fixes, not culturally tailor-made ones.

***Unsustainable projects***

These comments concern the sustainability of development interventions. Sustainability is currently a buzzword, today's aim being sustainable development. When initiatives, frequently projects, are over, whatever they have started often fails to continue. They are not apparently sustainable for one reason or another, sometimes because people sense that they are environmentally unsound. But no one consults them closely enough to know. When outsiders decide what needs to be done to further development, interventions depend on them for their implementation. The local population goes along with them so far as obliged by political coercion or by the economic goodies they receive for co-operating with the outsider's plans. When they leave, the development initiative goes with them.

***Sustainability***

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The wider implications of sustainability bring us to another challenge. *Sustainability implies a steady state, whereas development implies change.* While change inevitably occurs, from a sustainable perspective it is gradual, so as not to upset the complex relations of ecological and cultural systems, whereas development aims to promote rapid change. So is the idea of sustainable development a contradiction?

'Sustainable development' is therefore out of step with the nostrums of capitalist economics that inform development, notably the idea of growth. Development seeks to stimulate economic growth to reduce poverty while promoting sustainability, which is difficult to square. Either the policy is to go for growth, which implies increased exploitation of resources, or it is to go for sustainability, which implies their conservation. This does not preclude the possibility of technological advances allowing for the more efficient use of resources – although such advances often bring unforeseen environmental problems (e.g. as with high yielding varieties), but it is unlikely on current evidence that they will allow us to reduce poverty levels as planned through increased economic growth without further considerable destruction of natural resources and increased numbers of people following unsustainable lifestyles.

The environmental costs of the capitalist market as currently organised increasingly appear unsupportable in the long-term. The export of industrial technology and capitalist market arrangements does not look so wise from a sustainable perspective. What is the way forwards if we seek to lift people out of poverty globally, while preventing all of us sinking into it with despoliation of the planet?

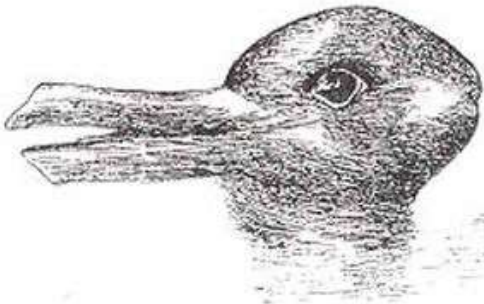
**Participation**

Development agencies have come to realise that it is not simply a case of transferring technology and economic arrangements from the top (or developed places) to the bottom (undeveloped places). It became apparent that the human element (i.e. people caught up in this process) figures large, as seen in peoples' responses to development interventions. It is naive to assume that communities will just adopt foreign technology and adjust to associated economic arrangements, particularly where these conflicted with their way of life and values. Slowly development agencies have sought to incorporate the local dimension through the use of participatory approaches. Farming systems research (prominent within CGIAR) played an early and largely unacknowledged part here, deploying multidisciplinary teams to document and analyse farm-household livelihoods in all their environmental, socio-economic, and agronomic complexity. But participatory approaches have not enjoyed the success anticipated by supporters. Why?

**Local versus global science**

There is the perennial problem of gaining parity between local knowledge and global techno-science. In seeking to challenge unfavourable comparisons, I use Jastrow's image (made famous in Wittgenstein's discussion of 'seeing').

Let me ask: what do you see? To ask: "Do you see, a duck or a rabbit, and which is 'correct'?" is wrongheaded. What you see may depend on what you are familiar with: if you are unacquainted with rabbits, for instance, you will see a duck. If you can see both alternately, you are aware of the image's two different aspects.



This image captures the spirit of local knowledge research and its ambiguity, where we try to get local and scientific understandings, which represent different views of the same world, to match up in some way, or complement one another.

We have to combat the portrayal of local knowledge opposed to scientific knowledge more effectively. We need to focus on the interface where knowledge negotiation occurs; on processes where local practices confront and influence and are influenced by science. The implication is not that we seek to translate local knowledge of farming into that of agricultural science, in all probability devaluing it in the process. Rather, interaction should produce hybrid knowledge drawing on scientific and local perspectives.

A difficulty is representing the many local knowledges sufficient to contrast with global science. Their protean character further makes comparison with science difficult, if not ill-advised. We need to engage with the complexity of relations that characterise all knowledge traditions. This relates again to the issue of generic development

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solutions, as sought by development agencies, versus socio-culturally specific ones with knowledge traditions differing widely between regions.

***Soundness of local science***

The scientific view is only one way of explaining experience of the world, albeit technically powerful. The idea that others' knowledge might have something to contribute, even challenge scientific understanding, appears to many preposterous; no other culture, after all, has come close to our technological achievements. These underpin development, which many people want in some form, wishing to share these material benefits; albeit on their terms, which implies negotiation.

While local knowledge is more circumscribed than scientific knowledge, it often matches and sometimes betters scientific understandings of, for instance, land use. We have many examples of the soundness of local science and practices, and the need to respect them - some previously considered 'primitive' and in need of change. It is increasingly accepted, for example, that local knowledge of natural resources and practices are integral aspects of any environment; notably in biodiversity management and conservation, where their demise may be as damaging as the loss of species.

***Local know-how and sustainability***

This brings us back to the question of reversing global environmental degradation and finding a 'sustainable' path. One approach is to consider what people are already doing, or did in the past, to secure their livelihoods, for in all probability they will reveal sustainable ways if humans have occupied a region for any length of time. An appreciation of local ideas and practices could encourage more sustainable development interventions in both the ecological and cultural senses, without falling into the trap of over-romanticising them.

In some respects it is presumptuous for the capitalist world to assume to tell such people about sustainability. It is ironic that the growing sense of an impending global environmental crisis is due to the activities of the 'over-developed' industrial nations, while much development amounts to the export of these activities elsewhere. There is a contradiction here. Talk of sustainable development implies undoing much of the change previously imposed on people to 'civilise' and later 'develop' them, with many subject to such interventions highly esteeming 'sustainable' ways of life. It presents particular challenges, one of which is overcoming the assumption that Western technology and economic arrangements are the only way forwards. Is this a political reality?

***Interdisciplinarity and local knowledge***

Another contributory factor to the perceived failure of participatory approaches to address development issues is inability to focus on identified researchable constraints. Or reversing the problem: how can scientists research constraints without losing sight of the overall socio-environmental system?

It is a battle overcoming the culturally disconnected approach that treats local knowledge a commodity, as bits of information thought to have development relevance to match up with technological fixes, with potentially distorting effects. We know that it is distorting to look at bits of knowledge divorced from wider socio-cultural context, as aspects of complex systems that manifest and often unexpected emergent properties. 'Participation' needs to make people's knowledge count, by situating culturally as necessary to understanding it.

Current calls for interdisciplinarity are notoriously difficult to achieve but offer an opportunity. The holistic perspective of local knowledge, interdisciplinary by definition and embedded within the wider context, suggests a novel way forwards, an antidote to reductionist science with its narrow specialisms, albeit one that experts may see it as a threat and therefore try to thwart it.

***Tacit knowledge***

Another challenge is the prominence of tacit understandings to local knowledge, much transferred through practical experience. The local focus reflects not only an absence of any universal aspirations but also the pragmatic rootedness of much local knowledge, which is contingent on acquiring particular skills. How are we to give such knowledge a place in development when by definition it is unspoken, even unspeakable, as opposed to doable? It

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relates to intriguing phenomenological problems that the social sciences are increasingly contending with; that is, behaviour that we are not focally aware of.

***Knowledge variation and political issues***

Another challenge is coping with knowledge variation. While we customarily talk about communities as if homogenous, we know that persons vary in what they know. They share an indeterminate amount (the same culture with a common history, language, values, and so on), but they do not replicate one another's knowledge, nor necessarily agree. While local knowledge is more widely shared than specialised scientific knowledge, its distribution is uneven with some clustering of certain knowledge within populations. Differences may exist along gender, age, class, occupational and other lines linked to political power. How are we to deal with participation where different parties have different understandings of issues and agendas which they seek to manipulate, the more powerful imposing their views on others, avoiding dubious political interference in other communities, while furthering understanding of political issues?

***Local political issues***

A related issue concerning participation is that in hierarchical societies, where patron/client relationships occur in villages or specialists/non-specialists in capitalist market contexts, people expect those above them to make decisions and perhaps solve problems on their behalf. If we seek to work through local arrangements, the poor will not expect to participate in any decision making; participation will not make much sense to them. In addition, generations of outside interference, first in the colonial era and now in the development era, has conditioned people to expect the 'experts' to come up with solutions to their problems, a tendency exacerbated by seeing the technology available to outsiders.

This is yet another contradiction. In these contexts participation on local terms will sideline the poor, with the patron classes assuming control. The challenge is to devise approaches that benefit the poor in any community, allowing people's knowledge and aspirations to feature centrally, which assumes meaningful participation, without the better off high-jacking benefits, the difficult part being to do this without engaging in social engineering.

This assumes a deep understanding of any community. A large flaw from an anthropological viewpoint is the ludicrously short time frames in which it is thought research can be conducted to achieve necessary understanding of such complex socio-cultural issues. This is something that participatory research has yet to resolve.

***Knowing what's at stake - education?***

To participate meaningfully in the planning and implementation of any proposed development assumes that people know what is at stake and about alternatives. This is not always so, and hence education 'to inform people' becomes a development priority. But how can we avoid education becoming brainwashing into the techno-capitalist view, effectively seeking to obliterate local views?

***International political issues***

The political confusions in development are legion. On the one hand we have those of a left wing persuasion who argue that development is about helping the poorest and for whom participation amounts to their empowerment. But it has to be participation on these outsiders' terms that may subvert the local political order, which is tantamount to social interference. On the other hand we have those of a right wing persuasion who argue that development is about getting the market to work, which may well mean working with and reinforcing established hierarchies, but to the benefit of all by increasing productivity overall, which reaches the poorer through the 'trickle down' effect.

It appears that neither side of the political divide will allow communities subject to their development attentions freely to freely participate on their terms. The left believes that it needs to employ some oversight to ensure that the more powerful in any community do not highjack development resources to their own ends. And for the right, it is necessary to exercise a certain level of supervision to ensure that the technological and economic changes it thinks necessary to improve peoples' standard of living are implemented 'appropriately'. It is small wonder that participation for canny villagers amounts to figuring out what the development agency or NGO thinks is necessary and parroting back what it wishes to hear to ensure that it releases available resources to the community.

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Political power in development contexts comes down to control of resources. How realistic is it to expect nations in control to relinquish this control when they believe that they have the answer to the problems of developing nations? The forces at work are more complex than multinational lobbied governments of dominant nations seeking to maintain their global hegemony, as dependency theorists argue. The realities of democratic politics mean that it is quixotic to expect such governments to make available resources, raised through taxes on their citizens, to populations with radically different ideas about development and political aspirations, for the taxpayer-voters would probably eject any government following such a strategy.

***Manipulation of participation***

When we consider current political realities, real participation appears a forlorn hope. It has become increasingly evident of late that participation is subject to manipulation by agency staff, according to their agendas. It is an aspect of the power relations that characterise development, the resourcing nations defining goals informed by their views of progress. The pressures under which staff work with political demands for oversight and 'results' (preferably quick) and subject to heavy monitoring and evaluation characteristic of today's Western audit culture, oblige them to so manage development projects to achieve the objectives of the funding agencies, not least to ensure the continuity of their employment. Consequently, they work out ways to manipulate participatory activities to serve their ends.

The up-shot is that although top-down interventions have been thoroughly criticised, they continue to dominate development interventions, even where these are wrapped up in the rhetoric of participatory discourse. These pressures oblige a blueprint approach that determines objectives before any project starts, subject to a series of 'milestone' markers to track progress towards them. Sustainable development, in the sense of projects that continue to flourish when outside intervention stops, demands a flexible process approach to allow meaningful participation that allows other people to define development according to their own priorities and aspirations.

***Misuse of knowledge***

A final participatory dilemma is that agencies may misuse knowledge made available in intervening in people's lives. There is also a danger of promoting the commercialisation of others' knowledge, given development's focus on promoting economic efficiency through various market interventions. How can we increase understanding of other ways of being in the world with a view to increasing peoples' say in development interventions without the risk of putting knowledge into the public domain that other's might unfairly exploit as a commodity? This brings to the fore concerns to protect people's intellectual property rights. But promoting intellectual property rights can disrupt the balance of communities. Claiming to own knowledge above others strikes at their foundations, flourishing for millennia under common not private property regimes.