

Enabling Rural Innovation

A partnership that links small farmers with markets to improve food security, incomes, and natural resources

Many African farmers are adopting new crop varieties that boost their production of basic staples, thus strengthening household food security and creating a larger surplus for the market. A key challenge now is to create a more entrepreneurial culture in rural communities, based on adept marketing of staple crops and other, higher value tropical products. Increased income from markets could, in addition to enhancing the well-being of farm families, give them new incentives to improve their management of the soil and other natural resources on which rural livelihoods depend.

In order for farmers to both compete and conserve, they must learn to acquire and apply the necessary knowledge through local participatory research. The partnership presented here, which caters specifically to women and the poor, helps them do precisely that, thus enabling rural innovation.

Purpose

To reduce poverty in Africa's rural communities through agroenterprise development and better management of natural resources, based on local participatory research.

Outputs

- Representative farmer research groups that are self-confident and capable of identifying and evaluating new market opportunities and technologies, taking into account gender and multiple-stakeholder analysis
- Diverse new agroenterprises, based on environmentally sound crop production and postharvest handling
- "Baskets" of technology options for crop production and soil management that fit the circumstances of women and poor farmers
- Lessons learned for wider application by local service providers, based on an on-going process of participatory monitoring and evaluation

Impact

- Enhanced household food security and increased income under women's control
- Stronger local capacity to identify and evaluate market opportunities as well as to generate and acquire technology, information, and knowledge
- Better links between farmer experimentation, formal research, and local extension service providers

Lessons Learned

- Farmer research groups rapidly gain self-confidence, opening the door to active participation in the search for new opportunities and solutions to problems.
- Activities must be planned with all partners from the project design stage.

- A flexible approach that encourages continuous feedback and learning is vital for strengthening the partnership and adapting it to changing circumstances.
- It is especially important that all partners become adept at working with rural communities, based on skilled facilitation and a firm grasp of farmer group dynamics.

Activities and Next Steps

The partnership has pursued the approach described here for 2 years at three locations. International organizations are developing participatory approaches through strategic research, while national institutions, NGOs, and farmer groups are adapting and applying them under diverse conditions. The approach is now being extended to many more sites and countries through collaboration with current and new partners.

Partners

- Farmer research groups at pilot sites in Dedza, Malawi; Lushoto, Tanzania; and Kabale, Uganda

National:

- Department of Agricultural Research and Services, Malawi
- Department of Research and Development, Tanzania
- National Agricultural Research Organization, Uganda

NGO:

- Traditional Irrigation and Environmental Development Organization, Tanzania
- Africare Uganda
- Catholic Relief Services, East Africa

International:

- African Highlands Initiative, an ecoregional initiative of the Association for the Strengthening of Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa (ASARECA)
- International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT)