

Farmer-led innovation key to lasting change

Transcript of a WorldFish podcast available at <https://soundcloud.com/worldfish/farmer-led-innovation-key-to-lasting-change>

Host: For agricultural research and development to have lasting impact, farmers must be involved in the process as co-researchers, and not just the subject of research or recipients of interventions, as they often were in the past. In this edition of the WorldFish podcast, knowledge sharing and learning scientist – Boru Douthwaite – explains how a new study has proven that when farmers lead innovation and experimentation, it can generate lasting change on many levels.

Boru: The green revolution has seen increased production of the yields of rice and wheat, particularly in Asia through the introduction of modern varieties, and together with that, input supplies like fertilizers, pesticides and the irrigation to go with it. With the green revolution, there were some winners and some losers. Modern varieties work best on the more favorable lands where you could control your irrigation, control your water where you have got access. And so, that tended to benefit the richer and more favorably located farmers, and other people were left out.

Boru: The key finding from Prolinnova and ETC Foundation's report is that farmers themselves are able to innovate, and farmer innovation can have profound impact. This is important because, in the places that were left behind by the green revolution, farmers themselves need to find solutions, improve their own varieties because modern varieties may not fit there. The second important finding from this is that research itself – the process of farmers doing research, of coming together to collectively look at how they improve their rice or bean yields, is an important process of building their capacity to innovate because it brings people together, people share information, share ideas.

Boru: Innovation is the process of people taking new ideas, new technologies and experimenting with them, and making them work in their own context. Farmers have always been innovating, examples of farmer innovation include the world's main food crops – the result of centuries and centuries, generations and generations of farmers experimenting and improving these varieties. So farmers can innovate but by building their capacity to innovate, what we mean is by building their confidence, building their linkages, building their access to new ideas and being able to make better selection decisions about what is working and what is not.

Boru: So the Theory of Change when we look across these different cases that the Prolinnova report looked at. It comes out with something which is actually quite different to normal project Theory of Change. The Theory of Change is that successful farmer-led research initiatives started small, started with something quite simple, maybe trying out a new variety that would be a quick win, that farmers would feel very much encouraged, that would build their own enthusiasm. They

would start to build their social capital, so that they would do more of it. As they started to do more, they realize that actually we can go beyond simply the technical experimentation and that we can start to collectively tackle broader issues. Because when it comes to poor farmers' livelihoods, it is more than just a technical fix, there are structural issues, there are power issues, access to land, things like that. And so what started to happen is that, through starting the experimentation and the safe space that created, people began to create a movement and started to tackle broader issues.

Boru: This report has some profound implications for agricultural research in development. One of them is that, if we want to foster farmer-led innovation and all the multi-faceted impact that brings, then we are going to have to treat it other than we treat our normal projects. We need to start small, we need to build on local enthusiasm and interest, and look at how we nurture that.

Host: To learn more about farmer led innovation, visit <http://www.worldfishcenter.org/>