BEYOND FARMER FIRST

Rural people’s knowledge, agricultural research and extension practice

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Foreword

Robert Chambers

In July 1987, some fifty natural and social scientists met for five days at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, UK, for a workshop on Farmers and Agricultural Research: Complementary Methods. The aim was to bring together professionals who had been involving farmers in the research process to share experiences and methods, to take stock and to plan for the future. The focus was on the resource-poor farming systems on which perhaps 1.4 billion people depended for their livelihoods. The papers and discussions were edited to become the book Farmer First: Farmer Innovation and Agricultural Research (Chambers, Pacey and Thrupp, 1989).

The Farmer First book argues that the approaches and methods of transfer of technology which have served industrial and green revolution agriculture, do not fit the resource-poor farming of the third, complex, diverse and risk-prone agriculture. It contrasts the more traditional, technology-driven agriculture, with its standardizing package of practices, with the complementary farmer-first approach or paradigm, which generates baskets of choices to enable farmers to vary, complicate and diversify their farming systems. It stresses, illustrates and explores the abilities of resource-poor farmers to experiment, adapt and innovate; the importance of giving priority to farmers' agendas and knowledge; a range of practical approaches and methods for farmer participation in research; and the implications for outsiders' roles and for institutions.

Since 1989, when Farmer First was published, much has happened. The analysis and thrust of that book have been more and more widely accepted. Growing numbers of professionals have made personal changes and accepted risks by advocating and adopting a farmer-first approach. But many scientists, teachers and extensionists are still trapped in top-down, centre-outwards institutions and transfer of technology (TOT) thinking and action, where 'we' determine priorities, generate technologies and then transfer them to farmers, and where farmers' participation is limited to adoption. All too easily, the farmer-first label and the rhetoric of participation have been adopted without the substance. A huge task remains for the personal, professional and institutional changes needed to enable research and extension adequately to serve resource-poor farm families. The changes advocated in the Farmer First book are still nowhere near being realized on the scale or with the commitment needed.

The arguments, cases and recommendations of that book stand, if anything with more force now in 1994 than they did in 1989. Increasingly, they apply not just to complex, diverse, risk-prone agriculture, but also to green
revolution and industrial agriculture, especially as subsidies are reduced and farming systems are complicated, diversified and intensified. The number of very poor people in the world has also increased. Those whose livelihoods depend on the third agriculture have risen by some 100 to 200 million, to a total now of over 1.5 billion. Sustainable livelihoods with adequate food and decent incomes from complex, diverse, risk-prone agriculture become an ever higher priority as pressures mount on the environment and on urban life and services through migration. So more than ever it is vital for professionals to struggle to learn how to serve vulnerable and resource-poor farmers better.

Fortunately, the frontiers of professional insights and methods have continued to be explored and opened up. As part of this, the Sustainable Agriculture Programme of the International Institute for Environment and Development conceived a three-year programme of research support and institutional collaboration entitled ‘Beyond Farmer First: Rural People’s Knowledge, Agricultural Research and Extension Practice’. Collaborators in a dozen countries prepared detailed case studies on the interplay between formal and informal knowledge systems and assessed the wider implications for agricultural research and extension practice. The cases were presented and reviewed, along with a variety of discussion papers prepared by a diverse group of researchers on key theoretical, methodological and institutional issues surrounding knowledge, power and agricultural science, at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, in October 1992. Together, they provide the basis for this book.

Readers who have been trying to achieve farmer-first objectives may note some new language and critical comments. Both the language and the comments deserve to be taken seriously. Scientists and extensionists who have been struggling in the field to offset biases against women, the poor and the excluded can take heart that they have already moved away from what is described here as ‘naïve populism’. In a farmer-first mode, more and more people have become sensitive to social inequality and differences, gaining insights and developing practices parallel to those presented and advocated in this book.

It is, though, more than just the language that has changed and moved on. Sometimes new words say old things, but important new things are also being said. Even when some of the major points of Beyond Farmer First can be found in earlier work, they are new here in emphasis, elaboration and empirical evidence. Let me summarize how these new emphases appear to me. Three sets of insights stand out.

The first concerns power and the pluralism of knowledge. Systems of knowledge are many. Among these, modern science is only one, though the most powerful and universal. Rural people’s knowledge is in contrast ‘situated’, differing both by locality and by group and individual, and differing in its modes of experimenting and learning: different people know different things in different places, and learn new things in different ways. These differences are reflected in and reinforce power and weakness. Scientific establishments and local elites (male, less poor, ‘progressive’) link together and monopolize some types of knowledge, while those who are weaker, dispersed and local are marginalized. The terms ‘farmer’, ‘farm family’, ‘household’ and ‘community’ need to be broken open, and differences of gender, age, social group and capability recognized and acted on.

Nor is knowledge just a stock, but a process. The issue is not just ‘whose knowledge counts?’, but ‘who knows “who has access to what knowledge” and who can generate new knowledge, and how?’ Especially, the questions are how those who are variously poor, weak, vulnerable, female and excluded can be strengthened in their own observations, experiments and analysis to generate and enhance their own knowledge; how they can better seek, demand, draw down, own and use information; how they can share and spread knowledge among themselves; and how they can influence formal agricultural research priorities.

The second set of insights concerns behaviour, interactions and methods. Farmers, extensionists and scientists are seen as social actors. Power relations are reflected in how they interact. The changes of role entailed in farmer-first approaches – for extensionists, to become not top-down TOT conveyor belts, but convenors, facilitators, catalysts, consultants and searchers and suppliers for farmers – these require changes in attitudes, behaviour and methods. The roles of farmers as observers, analysts, experimenters, monitors and evaluators require strengthening through new approaches and methods. Beyond the farmer-first repertoire of the late 1980s, there are now, as reported in this book, new methods and combinations of methods available, many involving visual analysis by groups. Poor people, whether literate or not, have in the early 1990s, in more than a score of countries, shown a far greater capacity to map, model, diagram, estimate, rank, score, experiment and analyse than outsider professionals have believed. Farmers have shown unexpected capabilities (even surprising themselves) and facilitators have a new and growing repertoire of analytical tools for farmers to use.

The third theme and set of insights concerns institutions. It is even clearer now than it was before that for organizations to facilitate participation requires that their own procedures, style and culture be participatory. Ways forward are presented by networks, alliances, lateral links, interactive learning environments and organizational strategies which permit and promote scaling up and spread. There are examples already and immense future opportunities in government departments, farmers’ organizations and international organizations, as well as the more obvious and better documented NGOs. There are implications for authority, communications, personal attitudes and behaviour and relations between organizations. The changes required are reversals, from top-down hierarchies with supply-driven orders, targets and supervision, to bottom-up articulation of needs with demand-drawn search and supply, and lateral sharing.

Reversals imply a new professionalism. This is not a rejection of modern scientific knowledge, of research stations and laboratories, of scientific method. These remain potent, have their own validity and will always have their place. Rather it is a broadening, balancing and up-ending, to give a new primacy to the realities and analyses of poor people themselves. These themes and insights are liberating for agricultural scientists and extension-
ists, opening up new ranges of experience and ways of working. The comfortable certainties of known normal science are then complemented by the exciting unknowns which follow from facilitating analysis by poor rural people and learning from and with them. Anyone concerned with agricultural research and extension who reads this book can hardly fail to be thrown back to questions basic to the agricultural professions:

- Whose criteria and priorities count?
- Whose knowledge?
- Whose modes of learning and analysis?
- Whose tests, experiments, observations, assessments?
- Whose reality counts?

The logic and realism of this new professionalism deserve promotion now more than ever. Decentralization, diversity and empowerment of the poor become key values to focus effort. Direct and personal facilitation in the field, and learning from, with and by farmers, is invested with professional prestige.

The new professionalism is dynamic. Change accelerates. We, outsider professionals concerned with agricultural research and extension, and more broadly, with rural development, have always to ask: what should we now be doing? The contributions to this book point forward to new issues, new challenges and new opportunities. To address these issues, meet these challenges and seize these opportunities makes demands in different ways on all actors in agricultural policy, research and extension: to question, innovate, take risks, embrace errors, and learn; to create and support new environments for learning and enabling; to develop, adopt and spread new methods and approaches; to form new alliances and associations; to articulate a vision of a new agriculture of equity and participation; and in many ways, in many places, to work to make that vision real, with poor farmers gaining more say and playing more of a part in the processes of agricultural research and extension, the better to serve and sustain their lives and livelihoods.