



BRINGING FARMERS TO THE TABLE: INNOVATING PLANT BREEDING

Synthesis and report on Oxfam Novib's workshop #3, 2 December 2021

On 2 December 2021, Oxfam Novib held its third and concluding global workshop on 'Bringing Farmers to the Table'. Researchers, policy makers, farmers and funders discussed how increasing the involvement of farmers in crop development and seed diffusion can contribute to sustained global food and nutrition security. Participants presented several novel initiatives with the intention of forging new partnerships and coalitions.

In the **first workshop** in March, farmers and donor agencies took center stage and it was acknowledged that a collaborative process of plant breeding - where farmers and researchers identify real-life production bottlenecks and define more appropriate breeding objectives – can result in varieties that better respond to farmers' preferences. It was recognized that there is a gap in bringing innovations to farmers, and that strong partnerships will be vital for bridging this gap and reaching scale.

In the **second workshop**, a month later, researchers and breeders from National Agricultural Research and Extension Systems (NARES) and CGIAR centers, universities and development practitioners were invited to identify options and priorities for collaborative breeding and seed system development programs based on (a) technical elements and conditions necessary for implementing activities at scale and (b) institutional elements to bring together farmers, organizations, NARES, extension systems and the CGIAR.

The **third workshop** brought together previous and new participants to discuss guiding criteria for future collaboration and to provide an opportunity for interested participants to present a pitch - a novel idea or an initiative already underway - that would stimulate new partnerships and collaborations in participatory plant breeding and varietal diversity dissemination. For all the effort collaboration requires, participants agreed that working and learning in partnerships is necessary if we are to address seed systems in their entirety and at scale, and further the contribution of smallholder farmers to agricultural research.

The pitches sparked in-depth parallel discussions and gave shape to practical ways participants may work together after the workshop. In the closing session, eager to link to and build on existing initiatives, participants expressed the need for a space such as the one provided by these workshops to continue to connect and exchange.

Pitches presented (details in Annex)

1. **The BOLD project** (Biodiversity for Opportunities, Livelihoods and Development), Ola Westengen, Norwegian University of Life Sciences
 2. **Linking university curricula** to on-the-ground PPB and seed system projects, Conny Almekinders, Wageningen University
 3. **Institutionalizing Farmer field schools** on PPB in Zambia, Charles Nkhoma, Community Technology Development Trust in Zambia
 4. (A coalition for) an **eco-regional programme** on PPB and seed system development, Anita Dohar, SD=HS programme Oxfam Novib
 5. **Embedding demand-led variety development** into seed systems and consumption, Jean Claude Rubyogo, Pan Africa Bean Research Alliance (PABRA)
- In addition, **farmer participants formed a working group** to propose ways to ensure farmer participation in future programme development and implementation. They were represented by Ali M. Aminou, who shared his experiences leading the Farmer Federation FUMA Gaskiya in Niger.

Criteria guiding future collaborative work

Based on inputs from the first two workshops, criteria to guide future collaborative work were presented and discussed by participants. The original criteria proposed:

Farmers/farmer organisations, NARES and International Agriculture Research Centres form equitable partnerships in which

- All parties recognize the advantages of and benefit from collaborative development and implementation of crop breeding and seed system programs that improve farmers' access to crop diversity
- Needs of smallholder farmers and indigenous peoples are prioritized throughout the research process: from co-defining breeding objectives to seed production and dissemination activities
- Scientific rigour ensures genetic progress
- Learning follows clear pedagogical principles based on participatory methods and empowerment processes, with focus on gender equity and inclusion of youth
- Initiatives support knowledge sharing and generating workable tools and models that can be replicated and institutionalized to expand outreach and impact

There was a consensus among participants on the proposed criteria with recommendations to make (more) explicit:

- Inclusion of the most vulnerable
- Farmers' linkage to markets (to increase resilience)
- Clarity of roles and responsibilities from the beginning
- Support to NARS in participatory methods

Knowledge sharing in the form of documentation exchange, communities of practice, and platforms was particularly emphasized as a major gap to address. Scientific rigour was also confirmed as being crucial.

Main takeaways of the third workshop

1. LINKING.

“Connecting the dots”

Linking was the most repeated word of the workshop and emphasized participants' interest in linking systems (formal/non-formal and other dichotomies), actors (farmers, students, researchers, organizations), topics (production to distribution, policy), and generally linking with one another. Linking existing work and creating channels to improve how we share and use data, experiences, and knowledge will be key.

2. MAINSTREAMING.

“This is no longer a guerilla movement”

Ensuring efforts are sustainable and long-lasting. This means adoption of models and activities by governments, especially NARES and including national breeding institutes and genebanks, which could serve as a bridge between technology and farmers. It is important to work with governments not only to create new policies, but also to make use of the space available within current policies. “Any government is pluralistic, look for your allies”. It was noted that several aspects of the work discussed have already been mainstreamed, a strong indicator that the collective work accomplished to date by many of the participants present has been effective.

3. BUILDING ON RESULTS.

“Success in one place can drive success in another place”

It was strongly acknowledged that this work is not starting from scratch. It will be crucial to build upon the many experiences, platforms, networks, etc that have cumulatively been developed over the last years - and create a movement. Spaces like the ones offered by these workshops are essential in providing the opportunity to build collaborations and collective agendas, also as an influencing body.

4. FARMERS FIRMLY AT THE TABLE.

“Nothing about us without us”

Farmers can no longer be considered passive beneficiaries. Farmers have the will and energy to collaborate with the organisations present and to assume active roles and responsibilities in equitable partnerships. The participants proved that successful examples already exist and there are plenty of initiatives committed to following this trend.

In conclusion, it was highlighted that the legacy of this final workshop was to kickstart ideas and the real work must now begin. Oxfam Novib committed to three action points:

- **Facilitate contact** between participants who want to collaborate
- **Advance its own pitch** in coalition with CIRAD and CCRP (and potentially others) with a pilot in place by end of 2022
- **Check up on participants** in due time: “if we don’t hear from you, you’ll be hearing from us – that’s a promise!”

ANNEX - PITCHES AND PARALLEL SESSIONS

1. The BOLD project (Biodiversity for Opportunities, Livelihoods and Development), presented by Ola Westengen, Norwegian University of Life Sciences

The BOLD project, a joint initiative with Crop Trust, has recently received 10-year funding from the Norwegian government to implement a global program linking gene banks to seed systems. The project is looking for pilots and models that can be upscaled. It seeks partners to co-develop new approaches for moving beyond dichotomies currently in place such as “formal” and “informal” and reframing the role of gene banks as seed system actors. The aim is also to bring the PGRFA community and seed systems community closer together to learn from each other.

 [Presentation](#)

Parallel session conclusions:

- Although new, builds on earlier Crop Trust project. Currently in early phase of identifying gene banks interested in working with farmers, NGOs, etc. Get in contact with Ola.

2. Linking university curricula to on-the-ground PPB and seed system projects, presented by Conny Almekinders, Wageningen University

The idea for this initiative is action learning and research, combining research with capacity development by creating opportunities for students to gain experience in the field, data collection and systematization. Including this in the curricula would provide opportunities for exchange between students and farmers and make data available for both research purposes and practically on the ground. Little funding needed since it's more about connecting the dots than starting a new project.

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Parallel session conclusions:

- Students can also be professionals with experience in Global North/South
- Farmers can also be considered students, co-evaluators, co-collectors of data and part of reflection
- Academic institutions in the Global South to be included
- Integration in existing program curricula could be challenging, other ways?

3. Institutionalizing Farmer Field Schools on PPB in Zambia, presented by Charles Nkhoma, Community Technology Development Trust in Zambia

A proposal to organize a holistic seed system in Zambia in which all the stakeholders of the seed system are connected. PPB efforts are institutionalized in partnerships between communities (farmer field schools) and public sector breeding institutes. They benefit from germplasm from external sources as well as from within, community seed banks, and are diffused to other communities, including ones that specialize in seed production and marketing. These can then feed into a farmer seed enterprise, which connect to agro-dealers for further dissemination. There is a supporting environment of agricultural extension for capacity building. Influencing policy is important.

 [Presentation](#)

Parallel session conclusions:

- Involvement and linkages with the private sector key, need to integrate this in the model
- Mechanism for mainstreaming PPB work needed
- Visibility of farmer participation important
- Farmer varietal registration a roadblock to be addressed

4. (A coalition for) an eco-regional programme on PPB and seed system development, presented by Anita Dohar, Oxfam Novib SD=HS programme

The coalition consists of the Collaborative Crop Research Program of the McKnight Foundation, CIRAD and Oxfam Novib. The initiative seeks to: advance existing models, methodologies and tools of each organization and promote collective learning through a co-implemented regional PPB and seed system development program; create partnership models that bring farmers and researchers together on equal footing; bridge the gap between PPB, seed systems and markets. Evidence from the ground will inform global priorities, advocating for alternative models that prioritize farmers.

 [Presentation](#)

Parallel session conclusions:

- Important for program to build on each other's strengths – use different tools, research, and document, learn from changing practices
- Check what other institutions could bring re: different ways to link breeders and farmers (ex. CIMMYT)

5. Embedding demand led variety development into seed systems and consumption, presented by Jean Claude Rubygo, Pan Africa Bean Research Alliance (PABRA)

Inclusive and demand-led bean breeding program of CIAT and Bioversity International in Eastern, Southern and Western Africa. The program covers the entire bean value chain from production to consumption with focus on sustainability in production and productivity for better nutrition, gender equity and income generation. Beans remain a key crop for food security.

 [Presentation](#)

Parallel session conclusions:

- Demand-led aspect is very transformative in terms of scale and changing livelihoods
- Using research products in local enterprises, especially women-led, brings in local investment
- Brings global level research to the national level
- Building partnerships takes time, long term support needed (funding from donors)
- Importance of having evidence for influencing and mainstreaming, PABRA has been good example

The Farmer group was represented by Ali M. Aminou from the Farmer Federation FUMA Gaskiya, Niger

FUMA is a CCRP grant recipient and an example of the farmer research network. They collaborate with researchers in co-developing research questions, formulating objectives and carrying out related activities. Farmers are now able to establish their own field trials independently, manage data digitally and expand collaboration with other research institutes.

 [Presentation](#)

Parallel session conclusions:

- Farmers should participate in the whole process. Methodologies and tools for data collection need to be clear and properly disseminated since farmers located in remote areas.
- Responsibility and power relationship between farmers and breeders must be equal. Farmers should not be beneficiaries but co-creators of knowledge.