

Journalists from the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation visit Nyando Climate-Smart Village to document ongoing climate change adaptation and mitigation work, 22-24 June 2014. © V Atakos (CCAFS)

DRS ALISON SHAW & PATTI KRISTJANSON

A social opportunity

Sustainability expert **Dr Alison Shaw** and agricultural development researcher **Dr Patti Kristjanson** share the details of their work towards implementing a research and development concept that, in our highly connected world, could change the way agricultural studies are conducted: social learning



To begin, could you summarise the challenges that surround the concept of 'social learning'?

Social learning brings diverse actors together to co-create new knowledge that leads to changes in practice and is mobilised through social networks. Yet bringing diverse actors with different incentives together is a messy, time-intensive process. Scholars and practitioners are interested in how learning occurs among people with different knowledge bases and different interests, to what extent learning is facilitated by participatory processes and whether learning is deterministic; for instance whether it always leads to improved outcomes.

The challenge, and opportunity, is to develop more clarity around what processes enable learning, under what conditions, how knowledge gets mobilised and the ways in which we can evaluate the quantitative and qualitative outputs and development outcomes.

You state that social learning is increasingly becoming a normative goal in natural resource management and policy. How does your work aim to aid integration of this concept within agricultural research projects?

Building relevant knowledge that will be used to change current practices is a normative goal and a challenge to researchers in the agricultural research and development arena. Geographic and social asymmetries are impacting the world's poor, leading to a spiralling impact of poverty and greater disparity between the haves and have-nots.

We explore three main questions: firstly, in what contexts and in what ways are socially differentiated and marginalised groups involved in the learning process? Secondly, what, if any, are the additional benefits of social learning when explicitly using strategies to include socially differentiated groups? And finally, what are the benefits and trade-offs of applying this approach for development outcomes?

Your studies are not without precedent; necessary process considerations to enable social learning have already been established. To what extent does your work expand on these existing studies on social learning?

Experimentation with social learning processes and ways of co-creating knowledge that leads to changes in practice is occurring among key players in the water sector in Western Australia, for instance, and among different scales of government, academia, non-governmental and private players in climate adaptation and mitigation efforts in British Columbia, Canada, among others. In the development context, decades of participatory action research makes social learning a ripe concept for organisations such as the CGIAR.

Agricultural research and practice among smallholder farmers in the developing world is rife with power dynamics and development contradictions. For example, many productive smallholder farmers experience periods of food insecurity throughout the year. In the developing world women comprise on average 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force, yet typically agricultural knowledge, technologies and resources are directed at male smallholder farmers. The goal of our research was to evaluate the learning effects of projects that bring typically marginalised groups, such as women, elderly, youth and indigenous, into the learning process and to consider the potential impacts on development outcomes.

Your current project places particular emphasis on inclusion of disenfranchised and marginalised groups. Can you expand on why their participation is so important and discuss issues that can arise from a lack of stakeholder engagement?

Addressing implicit and explicit power dynamics is a critical feature of social learning. The idea is that all actors involved in agricultural systems have knowledge to contribute. For example, the inclusion of women in participatory varietal selection projects led by the CGIAR has resulted in increased knowledge about the need for faster-cooking, more hearty varieties for households to combat food insecurity contributing to livelihood development. Women have also contributed ways to increase efficiencies in the entire agricultural process, while also gaining access to knowledge and power systems. This fulfils the multiple objectives of developing relevant and legitimate knowledge that also gets mobilised to develop practical agricultural and livelihood solutions.

Including marginalised people in the learning process gives access and legitimacy to the knowledge generated, so it is more likely to get mobilised along social networks. It also reframes current power dynamics. Researchers and decision makers have to position themselves as learners within the process. In this way, solutions emerging from social learning processes have the potential to be transformative in nature, building relevant and useable knowledge for sustainability.

Are there any notable events or external projects related to this work?

The CGIAR Development Dialogues is a high-profile one-day event designed to bring global attention to agriculture and related fields. We would also like to highlight an important ongoing social learning process – the Climate Change and Social Learning Initiative – in which knowledge is being co-constructed through many different channels with diverse agricultural research for development project teams all over the world.

Learn together, earn together

CGIAR is at the head of a broad array of projects and initiatives to bring fresh approaches to agricultural research – one of its latest investigations may help to ensure lasting, effective and useful research outcomes in the future

EARTH'S ECOSYSTEMS PROVIDE

services that are the foundation of social and economic development. At present, humankind is in danger of hurting future development through the unsustainable use of these ecosystem services. A period of relatively rapid transition is required to achieve more sustainable approaches on a large scale. However, whether decisions involve farmland, everglades or watersheds, resource management is a challenging task at all scales, from local to international, as a result of systemic complexity. Effective decision making in light of this complexity is a challenge humankind has struggled to address as its population swells rapidly.

Data and information on phenomena relating to social-ecological systems does exist, so where in the process is the disconnect? The gap between knowledge produced by researchers and its uptake by stakeholders – from farmers to international negotiators – is a difficult phenomenon to map, but success or failure to build resilience into social-ecological systems seems to revolve around social learning – whereby diverse groups are brought together to explore and experiment on ways to solve increasingly complex problems.

The concept of social learning can be used to drive transitions that build resilience to complex social problems like climate change, poverty and resource management. Defined by Mark Reed et al in a 2006 paper as a process whereby a change takes place in the understanding of a number of individuals, which occurs through interactions between participants in a social network and extends to wider communities, social learning moves the centre of problem resolution away from the isolated scientist or research group. Instead, this approach to learning and knowledge creation brings diverse actors including researchers together as co-creators of holistic solutions that shift thinking in a way that is relevant and legitimate to all participants.

AMENDING AGRICULTURE

This novel concept is attractive in a number of fields including agriculture and management because it presents an alternative route to new practices and paradigms that does not rely so heavily on assumptions. Indeed, history has frequently shown – especially in the area of development – that even innovative solutions based on seemingly sound, yet siloed assumptions can fall flat in

practice because they are ignored, or lead to unintended and unforeseen consequences. Changing current practices by building relevant knowledge through iterative processes that are inclusive and solutions-focused is what is offered by social learning – but in order to unlock its potential, a greater understanding of how this approach can be used more efficiently and effectively in research and development is needed.

CGIAR (see also p32) is concerned with the coordination and funding of studies in agriculture and related areas, and has been responsible for a great deal of work on social learning in recent years. Drs Alison Shaw and Patti Kristjanson are experts in sustainability and agricultural systems respectively, and their contribution to this body of work focuses on the impact of bringing marginalised groups into social learning processes, both in the production of successful development policy and in terms of generating legitimate process itself. Summarising CGIAR's work on social learning in agricultural research, Shaw explained: "The assumption is that inclusive learning approaches contribute to more nuanced, more effective, research-for-development practices and institutions, helping to achieve more sustainable results."

A critical feature of social learning is its potential to eliminate the skew of power dynamics – all actors within the agricultural system have knowledge to contribute

BUILDING A BASIS

Like many new concepts, a common pitfall associated with social learning in its recent history has been its lack of concrete definition as a term; though many studies over the last couple of decades have made use of social learning principles, many have not done so explicitly, or else have used the term inconsistently. CGIAR projects have been no exception, leading to the system's research programme on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS) investigation into the potential of social learning in agriculture research and development.

CCAFS researchers saw value in the approach and felt that in order to really progress, turning ideas into action, cohesive ways of evaluating social learning outcomes had to be developed in order to keep the concept and the literature surrounding it robust. On this basis, CCAFS launched the Climate Change and Social Learning Initiative, which aims to bring contributors together to generate a universal evaluative framework for social learning. Kristjanson, a leader in 'Knowledge to Action' research, describes the current progress of the action: "Multiple partners in the field are being brought into the initiative to compare notes about what is occurring and the benefits of such an iterative approach for learning from both successes and failures. In many ways, this initiative is a social learning experiment in and of itself".

MARGINAL VALUE

Specifically, Shaw and Kristjanson's work focuses on the impact of social learning in the context of the agricultural poor, and asks whether including traditionally disenfranchised and marginalised groups in learning and knowledge co-creation processes increases the likelihood of achieving development impact goals such as poverty reduction and food security enhancement goals/outcomes. A critical feature of social learning is its potential to eliminate the skew of power dynamics – all actors within the agricultural system have knowledge to contribute, regardless of other factors. By including women in a participatory project on varietal selection for food crops, for example, the CGIAR was able to gather increased knowledge about the actual needs of households; it was women who identified the importance of more hearty and faster-cooking varieties to bolstering food security and enhancing livelihood development.

Many such examples of marginalised groups contributing to participatory studies exist, each

representing a double success, since researchers and knowledge users benefit from new and relevant insights, and previously marginalised participants gain access to new knowledge and power systems. Some studies have also suggested that engaging marginalised groups is useful in the next stage of the social learning process: dissemination. Information generated through processes including such groups is legitimised, and likely to be mobilised over more expansive social networks. Women, in particular, can help to pass on relevant information very quickly. In this way, social learning has the power to affect real change towards more sustainable practices and modes of thought.

FROM THE GROUND UP

Working with multiple partners in this way can be challenging for researchers, but it has nonetheless become more popular in recent years because of its obvious benefits, especially in the field of agricultural development. The question that needs to be answered now is how to make the process more efficient, especially with regard to mobilising knowledge through new, more widespread and affordable information and communication technologies such as social media networks. CGIAR research will help answer this question – but perhaps more importantly, the initiatives of CCAFS are already bringing together individual experts and experienced organisations with something to say on this topic. In particular, the research programme is currently looking for investors to bolster the sterling efforts of its Climate Change and Social Learning initiative.

This endeavour, and others like it, are laying the groundwork for a paradigm shift in the way agricultural research is conducted – making social learning as a technique more robust, replicable, scalable and sustainable. "To really understand what social learning approaches can offer agricultural research for development across a range of contexts, we need a step change in how this kind of work is initiated, documented and evaluated," Kristjanson suggests.

Media visit to Nyand Climate-Smart Villages, June 2014.
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INTELLIGENCE

SOCIAL LEARNING: A CATALYST TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY?

OBJECTIVES

To investigate the effects of inclusive learning processes for the co-creation of relevant knowledge, its influence on knowledge mobilisation and to explore overall outcomes on poverty, food security and livelihood development among the rural poor.

PARTNERS

A diverse range of partners including:

International Institute for Environment and Development • Institute of Development Studies • CARE International • Mediae • International Livestock Research Institute • World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) • International Center for Tropical Agriculture • Bioversity • International Development Research Centre • University of Oxford • PROLINNOVA • FlipSide Sustainability

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RESEARCH PROGRAM ON
Climate Change,
Agriculture and
Food Security

