Social learning and climate change

Social learning brings multiple stakeholders together to provide their insights on a complex problem in order to arrive at shared solutions.

Why use social learning?

Climate change is a complex phenomenon involving the interaction of many social and ecological factors. Importantly, it is context-specific, with each community facing its own unique climate challenges and constraints. Nor are these challenges fixed; they evolve over time and can be affected by changes in agricultural production. The picture is further complicated by the existence of multiple stakeholder perspectives, levels of knowledge and cultural frameworks.

The social learning approach to research is as concerned with the social context of science as it is with methods and results. It taps into a broad array of knowledge to enable joint learning around a shared purpose. Through a facilitated process of planning, implementing, reflecting and adapting, stakeholders can arrive at collective solutions to complex challenges. In the field of development, social learning also enables communities to derive tailor-made support from relevant actors such as governments, scientists and extension workers. Social learning theory was developed decades ago to help explain human behaviour. Now, CCAFS is investigating the potential for social learning to support research on agriculture, food security and climate change.

Challenges and benefits

While social learning does not require face-to-face interaction, transformative change – the goal of social learning approaches – is more likely to be achieved by bringing people together. Social learning approaches require strong facilitation of both processes and negotiations to chart a common course through many different perspectives, agendas and expectations. Building understanding and trust is a time consuming – and sometimes frustrating – exercise. All things considered, social learning can be an extremely expensive and lengthy process. And it may take quite some time to see the direct benefits. Why then has CCAFS taken such an interest in social learning?
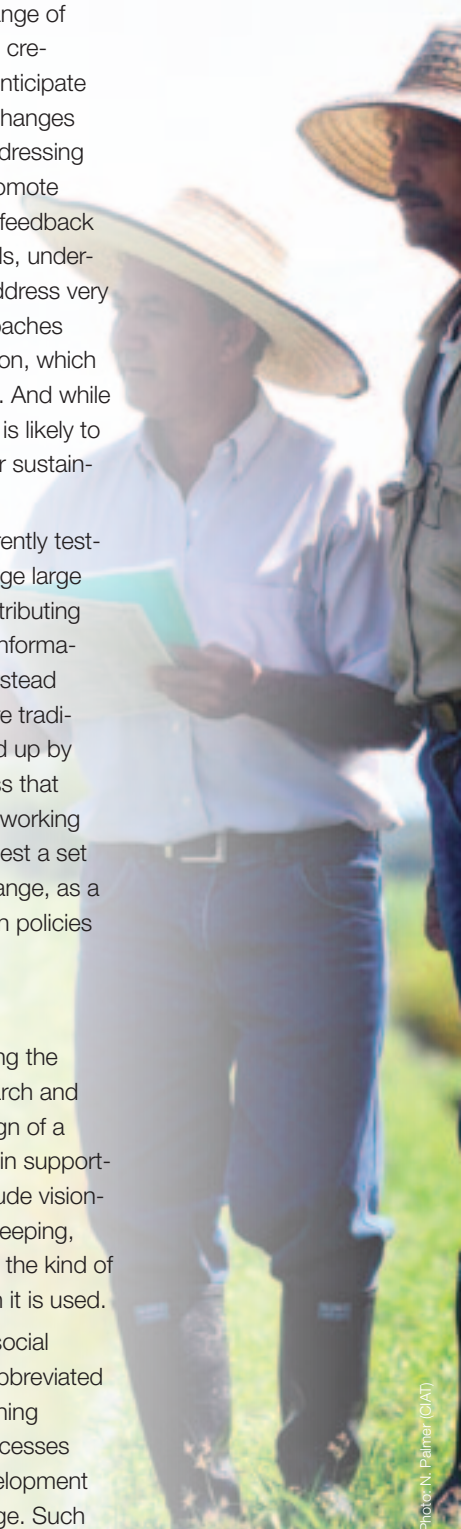
By facilitating dialogue among a broad range of stakeholders, social learning approaches create feedback loops that allow actors to anticipate and respond to environmental or social changes that might arise during the process of addressing climate challenges. Such approaches promote systematic learning, which sharpens the feedback loops and, by enabling a wider set of skills, understanding and insights, helps people to address very complex problems. Social learning approaches place a major emphasis on communication, which tends to engender trust and cooperation. And while the process may be slow, social learning is likely to lead to more ownership, and thus greater sustainability, of development initiatives.

As an example, CCAFS partners are currently testing the use of mobile technology to engage large numbers of farmers in evaluating and distributing seeds. This allows researchers to share information with tens of thousands of farmers, instead of the hundreds typically reached by more traditional survey approaches. This is followed up by a facilitated participatory planning process that involves public and private sector actors working closely with researchers to develop and test a set of plausible scenarios around climate change, as a tool for developing sustainable adaptation policies and strategies.

Strategy and tools of the trade

Social learning does not call for reinventing the wheel. Participatory approaches to research and development have already seen the design of a good many tools that can be very useful in supporting social learning processes. These include visioning exercises, theories of change, diary keeping, exchanges and field visits. The key is not the kind of tool that is used but the intent with which it is used.

Initiated by CCAFS, the climate change social learning and communications initiative (abbreviated as CCSL) is investigating how social learning approaches can improve institutional processes and effectiveness and lead to better development outcomes in the context of climate change. Such

Photo: N. Palmer (CIAT)

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A trio of research approaches

CGIAR has used participatory approaches – where community members are typically involved in a research process – for decades and, more recently, has invested heavily in knowledge sharing. How does social learning differ from these approaches and is it likely to replace them in CGIAR's toolkit?

While there is certainly some overlap between participatory research, knowledge sharing and social learning, they can also be seen as different points on a continuum. Participatory research uses local knowledge and perspectives as the basis for planning and research. It places an emphasis on the social context of research but is less concerned with learning and transformation. Nor are all of the stakeholders necessarily on an equal footing when it comes to contributing and benefiting from the research process. For its part, knowledge sharing is concerned with exchanging experience, skills and understanding. While some of the knowledge will certainly relate to social context, the principle purpose is to promote active learning, rather than to transform the way that people think and act. Knowledge sharing tends to be a linear process, as opposed to social learning, which relies heavily on feedback loops to enable stakeholders to continually reflect on how to make the learning process more efficient, effective and robust.

Social learning brings together actors from all sectors to co-create new knowledge and strategies for addressing challenges such as climate change. It goes beyond smallholders and communities and can include many different stakeholders as co-learners – financial institutions and international organizations, for example — and it requires more than participation or inclusiveness. Social learning typically combines online and offline approaches (such as workshops) that bring stakeholders together to exchange ideas, tools and options for tackling common challenges. Common tools include surveys and strategies for capacity strengthening, communications and monitoring and evaluating progress towards shared goals. Stakeholders test and refine the tools and approaches collectively, building dialogue, awareness and learning. Despite its promise for transforming local decision-making, however, the lengthiness and cost of social learning processes mean that it may not be suited to all climate change interventions, especially those that are less complex and involve fewer interdependencies.

approaches include farmer field schools, participatory varietal selection using crowd-sourcing, public–private sector learning alliances, community-based adaptation management and participatory future scenarios. The body of evidence supporting these approaches is still limited and so CCSL is undertaking research on social learning methodologies and amassing a collection of tools, strategies and examples of impact. In addition, CCSL was recently asked by CCAFS to come up with a checklist of practical guidelines for social learning.

As well as documenting social learning approaches, CCSL is supporting a growing community of practice on social learning. In 2012, CCSL set up the 'sandbox,' a virtual space where people from the academic and research worlds come together to think about the application of social learning approaches to climate change and to develop creative projects that use social learning to contribute to local decision-making on climate change. A discussion space, an information repository and a peer-support network, the sandbox is itself an example of how social learning can work in practice. If social learning proves its value over the next few years, CCAFS will mainstream social learning approaches into its work on climate change, agriculture and food security.

To find out more, please visit http://ccafs.cgiar.org/ climate-change-and-social-learning

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