

## EDITORIAL

**Bringing man back in(to) agronomic and animal science research.**

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Within the last five years, increasing attention is being directed to the human aspects of agricultural research and rural development. There now seems to be some prospect, albeit timid, of «Bringing Man Back in(to)» the R and D mix through farmer-oriented research.

«On-farm research» «Farming Systems Research and Extension» «On-Farm Trials», «Research and Development» etc. are all attempts to convert erstwhile ad hoc and largely reactive approaches to agricultural research into a more consistent and hopefully sustainable methodology for seeking answers to the age-old question of why peasants remain peasants.

Increasingly, engineers are willing to listen to sociologists (even if contemptuously!), and agronomists are «opening up» and developing encouraging dialogue with sociologists and anthropologists. Still lagging and uncommitted to the quest for meaningful scientific dialogue are the animal scientists who still have to recognize that feed, vaccines and laboratory chemical analyses are not enough to transform nomadic herdsmen into ranch managers or traditional small ruminant raisers into commercial breeders.

Significant insights can be gained by integrating the Sociological Imagination into agronomic and animal science research in order to speed the individual (peasant) upwards more rapidly. Awareness of Indigenous Knowledge Systems brings the agronomist face to face with the disquietening realization that a new HYV may not be as important to the farmer as the local old variety which «tastes better»; or the obstinate preference, to the chagrin of the animal scientist, of a black he-goat to a white ewe depending on the social context in which the decision is being made.

The application of sociological perspectives and methodology in the study of crop and animal production (from production to consumption) becomes more essential as it now seems that the need for sustainable agriculture cannot be met without the participation of the farmer whose attitudes, aspirations and motivations must be understood by researchers and policy-makers alike.

The protection of essential natural processes and biodiversity as well as the meaningful conservation of soil, water, animals, plants and humane agro-ecological environments are central and subject to Man himself. How then, a sociologist would ask, can a new variety of maize be developed without taking into account the food habits and farming practices of the farmers? A new variety may be developed and introduced in order to increase yields, but the sociological imagination informs the rational research mind that peasants will grow only «as much as they can carry» particularly if motorable farm roads are non-existent or where family labour is scarce.

During one of my field contacts with a veterinarian, he felt insulted and bemused by the refusal of local herdsmen to vaccinate their animals at the minimal charge of 20 francs CFA (less than US .10 cents) per animal. It required sociological imagination and enquiry to discover that the graziers' non-adoption of the vaccine was due not to the cost of the vaccine, but rather to their awareness that vaccination by the vet invariably provides the agent (of the government not the farmer) the opportunity to carry out a contrived animal census which would be the basis for a cattle tax per head. If the cattle are not vaccinated publicly by the government agent, the farmer believes, the government would never know how many animals the farmer owns, thereby assessing incorrect and generally lower taxes.

The obstacles and weaknesses of current research should, be seen as challenges and opportunities for future research agenda. Research programmes in plant/animal production, protection and processing should be weaned from their traditional dependency on macro analysis, yield and cost studies to hone multidisciplinary approaches that integrate man into biological and genetic analysis.

The challenge in the 90s should focus on efforts to reverse the current decline in S and T research which ignores the insights of sociological and anthropological concepts, processes and research methodologies. Such research must be both aggressive and successful so as to create and articulate an understanding among students, farmers and policy-makers of Man\*, the pivot around which all research invariably revolves and to foster human progress.

\* Man\* is used in the text as a generic term to include Woman

After thirty years of uncertainty and path-finding in agricultural and rural development work in Africa, the prospects are brighter (or ought to be brighter) for the peasants in Africa, Asia and Latin America than ever before. The prospect for positive changes in the farmers' favour are represented by the new developments in S and T which tend to favour food and agriculture tremendously.

During most of Africa's post independence years of agricultural research and designs in rural development, the most urgent task was to increase production. This tendency has continued until the late 80s with the dominance of economic theorizing and agronomic research on miracle grains.

This trend needs a radical and quick reversal to go beyond the romance with production-oriented (yield/cost) research. Attention needs to be shifted to equally urgent processes, such as protection, processing, conservation and consumption.

To do this, genuine institutional support is needed to strengthen on-going work in indigenous knowledge systems, biotechnology and technology policy and research, as these domains impact directly and significantly on agriculture. Such support includes funding for the formulation and implementation of plans, programmes and policies that encourage research linkages and interactions between the biological, chemical and social sciences and engineering particularly at the farmer's level.

Special financing should be provided to train truly operational rural paraprofessionals with a thorough grasp of rural life and institutions. Training in livestock extension needs special consideration in future research and development agendas in view of the sad dearth of animal extension agents at all levels in many rural communities.

Bold steps towards commitment and will to the agricultural sector by policy-makers should be forged by transforming oratory into action in agricultural research in a way that will diffuse the stubborn proclivity of animal scientists to reductionism in chemical analysis as well as ginger up the unfortunate timidity of sociologists to assert themselves as veritable professional de facto watchdogs of human society and its dynamics.

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