

Involving farmers in research: good practice for participatory projects in the UK

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Key findings

- Communication
- Team building
- Training
- Facilitators
- Relations with farmers
- Longer term commitment
- Statistical advice
- Research at multiple scales
- Negotiate goals
- Realistic costing

Introduction

This note summarises the key points arising from an assessment of research projects where farmers and academic researchers from several disciplines came together to consider an issue related to the sustainability of agro-ecosystems. The following findings suggest good practice for participatory, interdisciplinary research, based on the findings of the research project.

1. Communication is imperative. Interdisciplinary and participatory research, by its very nature, brings together people from varying backgrounds, disciplines, skills and perspectives. Effective communication, using accessible language and terms, is necessary to ensure that the group understand each other and can discuss the aims and expectations of the research, as well as implement plans, interpret information and disseminate results to the wider community. Communication should be multidirectional: identify all communication channels that need to be maintained, such as among members of the research team, between farmers and the project team / key researchers; provide feedback of results to farmers; act on farmers' recommendations; facilitate farmer-farmer learning; listen to informal feedback from farmers / field-level researchers.

2. Team building is important at the outset of the project, and should be continued periodically throughout. Team building should seek to enable team members to explain their background and reason for participation in the project. It is also important to discuss the goals of the project, as well as recognise the goals of individuals involved. Team building can identify synergies between people, as well as potential conflicts. It can also develop capacities (such as facilitation skills) among team members. This is rarely costed into proposals.

3. Training in Farmer Participatory Research should be provided for both farmers and researchers. Farmers need to learn a new culture: what is expected of them, what they can contribute and how to respond. Researchers need to learn to value non-academics as members of the team, who have important views and roles to play. Training should include information on research methods and ways of interacting with people from different disciplines and non-research backgrounds.

4. Boundary spanners and facilitators were found to be important factors in most projects. These researchers or advisors had the knowledge and skills to bring disparate groups together, facilitate the development of relationships, ensure clear communication, and help stimulate the development of trust between all parties.

5. Relations with farmers are crucial. Farmers play a pivotal role in enabling ‘on-farm agro-ecosystems’ research to be carried out. However, alongside their involvement in a research project, farmers are still running a business, with contracts to meet (for delivery of farm products), environmental management agreements to honour (such as ELS, CSS, WIGS), legislation to be adhered to (e.g. health and safety, environmental pollution), and profitability to consider. Therefore research projects must work around pre-existing commitments, bear in mind the demands they are making on farmers, and accept that sometimes farmers’ priorities will not be those of the researchers.

6. Longer term commitments to farmers enable them to feel more valued. Ideally, farmers are known by the researchers before the project begins, and contribute to project development. Farmers should not be dropped at the end of a project: the ethics of disengagement needs to be considered and you need an initial exit strategy before you start.

7. Statistical advice should be sought as the research proposal is being developed. This will give an indication of the number of farms (or area) required to provide statistically robust results, as well as guidance on experimental layout. Planning of research should also ensure there are enough replicates as it may not be possible to use data from all the farms originally involved in the project due to commercial pressures on farmers to change treatments. Too many projects only call on a statistician towards the end of the project, when results are coming in. At this point, it is too late to make any changes.

8. Research at multiple scales is almost always necessary. Data may need to be collected from small scales, such as plots, to the scales at which farmers operate (i.e. the field or whole farm), to the landscape scale (especially where examining the interactions of species that move across larger distances). Projects must consider how data from different scales will be brought together in the final analysis.

9. Goals need to be negotiated. Farmers may want practical ideas that they can implement immediately. Lobby group scientists want to disseminate research breakthroughs rapidly, via membership newsletters or popular press, possibly before scientists feel they have been thoroughly tested. Researchers may want statistically tested and valid results which can be disseminated via publication in peer-refereed journals – a process which takes many years. Businesses want to act on information quickly, while it can give them a competitive advantage. Participatory research needs to balance the needs of these different stakeholders to enable and ensure co-operation continues.

10. Cost - farmer participatory research is not necessarily cheaper or quicker. Rather than investing in equipment and experiments, it requires a lot of staff time, often at unusual hours (e.g. evenings) and staff need to develop working relationships with farmers. Research projects cannot expect to “hit the ground running” with a new group of farmers.

For more details of the project go to <http://www.mdx.ac.uk/www/ceedr/esrc.htm>

The research was conducted as part of the Research Councils’ Rural Economy and Land Use (RELU) Programme (Project: RES 224-25-0084).

