

NOTE 5: Enabling Rural Innovation

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There is plenty of information available in the public domain that covers various aspects of extension and know-how about new methodologies for implementation. However this information is often scattered and presented in complex academic language. Hence practitioners, who often have very limited time and/or may only have basic formal education, find it difficult to make use of this information.

The Global Good Practices Initiative aims to bridge this gap by providing information about extension approaches and methods in easy-to-understand formats. As part of this effort, it makes "Good Practice Notes" available to all on a downloadable website. This Note contains one of the extension methods included in this series.

Introduction

Enabling Rural Innovation (ERI) is a participatory approach that puts family farmers in the centre of agricultural development. It strengthens their technical, organisational, social, and entrepreneurial capacities to shift from subsistence to market-oriented agriculture. It aims at developing profitable agro-enterprises without jeopardising food and nutrition security. Farmer groups are supported in (re-)discovering social, technical, natural, and economic resources around them, setting group objectives and monitoring their progress towards them, making market studies, experimenting with different technologies, and setting up agro-enterprises, while safeguarding their natural resource base.

The methods used in the five ERI key modules are not completely new, but integrating them into the ERI approach is. The International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) spearheaded ERI from 2001 onwards. Following ERI projects in Eastern and Southern Africa, they joined with the Centre for Development Research (CDR) at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences in Vienna (BOKU) to further develop the approach for organic agriculture and niche markets in Uganda, in partnership with Africa 2000 Network and Uganda Environmental Education Foundation (UEEF).

Later, several non-government organisations (NGOs) in East Africa took up the ERI approach as a methodological framework for rural development. After gaining initial experience, the NGOs HORIZONT3000 and Trias Uganda consolidated their experiences in a practical manual to make ERI training more effective and efficient. Local NGOs and farmer district associations in Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya are now implementing ERI under programmes of NGOs based in Austria (HORIZONT3000), Belgium (Trias), and the Netherlands (ZOA).

Philosophy and principles

ERI is a solution-focused approach that builds on farmers' strengths. It stimulates farmer groups to identify available natural, social, financial, and personal resources and helps them find innovative solutions and make informed decisions on marketing, production, and consumption. Rather than being passive 'beneficiaries', farmers develop, drive, and own agro-enterprises. They choose what they need and want after being supported in acquiring production and marketing information. ERI thus enables farmers to respond appropriately to dynamic markets and changing environmental conditions.

The approach encourages entrepreneurial spirit: 'Produce what you can market rather than market what you produce'. It helps farmers balance food- and cash-crop production through easily applicable decision-support methods that put great emphasis on managing natural resources so that income security does not compromise food security and environmental sustainability.

Gender balance in both participation and decision-making plays a crucial role in ERI. Based on reporting data from 2014 in the HORIZONT3000 ERI East Africa project, 64% of farmer group members are women and 60% of the leadership positions are held by women.

Implementation

The key players in implementing ERI are community development facilitators (CDFs), usually employed by local NGOs or farmer district associations. They start by identifying and selecting existing farmer groups or forming farmer groups that would like to work with the ERI approach. After discussing the participants' expectations and conducting group-strengthening activities, the CDFs guide farmers through a series of practical learning sessions as outlined in Box 1. One CDF usually works



BOX 1: KEY MODULES IN THE ERI APPROACH

- 1. Participatory diagnosis** – Farmer groups assess the resources and opportunities available to them and how they can use them to achieve their goals. They develop a common vision and agree on objectives and an action plan to realise them. The most important tools for this are role-play methods from the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) Tool Box,¹ such as river code, visioning, seasonal calendar, resource maps, and institutional network analysis.
- 2. Participatory market research** – Farmer groups conduct market research to identify, prioritise, and analyse profitable markets and enterprises. Meetings are held with all stakeholders relevant for agro-enterprises (farmers, input suppliers, traders, extensionists, microfinance actors, local administration, etc). Based on the collected information, farmer groups conduct a cost–benefit analysis and risk assessments to select viable enterprises. Pairwise ranking helps to prioritise market options.
- 3. Farmer participatory research** – Farmer groups learn about the principles of sustainable agriculture and experiment in their own fields to test which technologies work best for new cash- and food-crop opportunities. A committee within the group develops a research protocol and data collection tools and analyses the research findings.
- 4. Enterprise development** – Farmer groups develop profitable enterprises and build sustainable business relations based on simple business plans and market intelligence.
- 5. Participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E)** – Farmer groups keep track of their progress towards achieving their goals and learn from successes and failures. Another internal committee develops monitoring tools, collects, and analyses the data, and gives feedback to the group by using PM&E tool kits.
- 6. Crosscutting issues** – These include gender, group dynamics, and governance, and are addressed in all five modules.

with 8–10 farmer groups in facilitating ERI modules and making follow-up mentoring visits.

Capacities required and how developed

The main qualifications to become a CDF are: profound knowledge of agriculture, natural resource management, and community development; experience in facilitating participatory, bottom-up development processes with farmer groups; and enthusiasm for fieldwork and confidence in farmers' capabilities to lead development processes.

Over a six-month period, including practical fieldwork, ERI trainers hired by supporting NGOs build the CDFs' capacities in all ERI modules and in the facilitation skills needed for working with farmer groups. In individual mentoring sessions, CDFs receive tailor-made refresher training and are accompanied in the field during their work with farmer groups.

The costs of hiring and availability of ERI trainers varies with their experience and current form of employment. New ERI trainers are sourced by gradually engaging motivated CDFs in training activities within ongoing projects until they have the necessary skills and experience.

Governance

ERI can be implemented on different scales, varying from small projects in local organisations to large regional programmes. The stakeholders involved vary with the set-up of projects as designed by supporting NGOs. Typical stakeholders in earlier or ongoing ERI projects in East Africa and their roles in governance are described in Table 1.

Costs

Cost for ERI projects vary considerably with the number of farmer groups and the distance between these groups and where CDFs are based. In most ERI projects, salaries

of CDFs, overhead costs of implementing partners, travel by CDFs to the field, mentoring sessions, and exposure visits of farmer groups (e.g. market studies, field days) constitute the major costs. Other costs to be considered are for training materials (ERI facilitator's manual and charts), CDF training and mentoring (about six weeks' group training by ERI trainers), and operational costs of the supporting NGOs and their implementing partners.

A set of training materials costs about €250. Costs for training and mentoring one CDF range from €1500 to €2000. Facilitating and then mentoring one farmer group (15–25 members) in all ERI modules and crosscutting issues over a 2-year period costs between €1850 and €4300 in HORIZONT3000's ERI East Africa Project.

Strengths and weaknesses

The greatest strength of the ERI approach is the visioning at the onset of the process in combination with resource-based planning, while the PM&E module enables farmers to track progress towards their goals. This combination leads to a demand-driven development process. Farmer groups build on existing resources and develop enterprises suited to their specific needs and the local context.

Another strength is that farmers gain knowledge and skills that can be applied not only for one specific crop or livestock species, but for a broad range of agro-enterprises. Farmers develop a business-oriented mindset and, by giving explicit attention to sustainability issues, they learn to balance production, natural resource management, and food security.

A challenge in the approach is that it requires long-term commitment by the supporting organisations (e.g. about 30 training sessions followed by mentoring). Farmers also need to make a large investment of their time and labour to work through the ERI modules. For example, the module on farmer participatory research sometimes takes several seasons.

¹ Available at: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/003/x5996e/x5996e06.htm>

Table 1. Typical ERI stakeholders and their roles

Stakeholders	Role in governance of ERI activities
Farmer groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actively engage in ERI activities and participate in training and mentoring sessions Organise themselves as a group and build committees for farmer participatory research, participatory market research, and PM&E Develop a group vision, work towards achieving their short- and long-term objectives and monitor progress Continuously collect up-to-date market information (e.g. by inquiring prices from traders) and inform their group Conduct experiments on crop and/or animal husbandry and give feedback to their group Develop several enterprises for food security and marketing
Implementing partners (NGOs, community-based organisations or farmer district associations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan field activities together with supporting NGOs and funders Employ a team of CDFs who facilitate learning processes in farmer groups and mentor them according to needs Develop own ERI capacities through participation in training Organise exposure visits and field days together with participating farmer groups Monitor progress of farmer groups in applying the approach
Supporting NGOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain pool of trainers with long-term experience in applying the approach Organise training, mentoring, and reflection meetings to build capacities of CDFs in implementing partners Monitor and evaluate ERI activities of implementing partners Guide implementing partners in planning and implementing ERI field activities Provide funding for implementing partners

The ERI approach does not provide financial support for developing agro-enterprises. Therefore, farmer groups depend on capital from group savings and credit schemes or they must approach nearby financial institutions to seek loans. This can slow down the process of expanding their enterprises and requires them to start on a small scale, with limited profit in initial years.

Best-fit considerations

The target groups of ERI are family farmers already organised (or willing to be) in small groups that want to engage in farming as a business. Although the principles and some of the training sessions are relevant to more commercially advanced farmers, the approach is not primarily meant for farmers already with successful agri-businesses and organised in higher-level associations or cooperatives.

The ERI approach includes women, youth, and disadvantaged groups, and creates appropriate livelihood opportunities for them. In ERI projects in Uganda and Tanzania, many women groups successfully built agro-enterprises upon their specific expertise, such as a catering service with collectively produced vegetables or producing and marketing products like local vegetable seed, sweet potato juice, and crisps. It has proved useful for women's husbands to be included in ERI training so that they gain a better understanding of their spouses' activities and commitments.

As ERI is an approach that builds on attitudinal change and commonly applicable principles of learning by experimentation or market studies, it is not limited to a specific area of innovation. In earlier and ongoing ERI projects in East Africa, farmers developed innovations in production technologies (e.g. by trying out different crop varieties or different cultivation or livestock management practices) and social innovations (e.g. collective production, storage and marketing of produce to different buyers, forming producer associations). Not

only groups but also individual farmers embraced the idea of experimental learning and increased their innovative capacity.

Since applying the ERI approach starts with identifying locally available resources as a basis for developing agro-enterprises, it can be used in different ecological environments. In areas where opportunities for diversifying production and marketing of produce are limited, farmers try to overcome those obstacles with acquired knowledge and skills (e.g. by going to distant markets with larger quantities of bulked produce). Difficulties have emerged when working with farmer groups that have become accustomed to receiving free handouts – such as seeds or other farm inputs – from organisations in the region, as this lowers the farmers' motivation to invest in their enterprise themselves. The approach is not suitable for farmers living in extremely remote areas, as they are too far from potential markets to collect market information and sell their produce.

Evidence of impact and potential scalability

Evaluations of ERI projects in East Africa showed that ERI empowered farmers and stimulated their self-confidence and critical thinking. Farmers developed business attitudes, knowledge, and skills that led to improved production and productivity, better quality of produce, better trade relations, better prices, and increased incomes. Success stories and evaluations² describe how farmers can now transfer their skills in experimentation and marketing to other enterprises and can respond quickly to a changing environment.

Project evaluations showed that neighbouring communities to participating farmers also benefitted from ERI projects by starting new enterprises, applying soil and water management practices observed in farmer-led experiments, or setting up kitchen gardens. However, scaling out the approach horizontally requires substantial funds for the implementing and supporting organisations.

² www.eri-approach.info/impact



Moreover, ERI facilitation with farmer groups requires qualified CDFs to assure the quality of learning and follow-up activities. If the needed resources can be provided by higher-level institutions, e.g. national extension services, the ERI approach could be scaled up gradually while building capacities of CDFs and their trainers.

Issues of sustainability of the approach

The design of the ERI approach supports sustainability on a farmer-group level, as the development process is owned and led by farmers. Local committees of elected group members coordinate the monitoring and evaluation, experimentation, market studies, and enterprise development. The key actors, once equipped with relevant skills and knowledge, remain active after the supporting organisations have withdrawn.

The risk that farmer groups stop following ERI principles after experiencing all learning sessions can be decreased by prolonged mentoring periods and strengthening the groups to help them become more independent, e.g. through group savings and credit schemes, strong leadership structures and skills, assigning farmer trainers for group mentoring, and linking them with nearby ERI groups so that they can exchange experiences and form producer associations or cooperatives.

Sustainability in the sense that relevant organisations can continue to support ERI farmer groups is increased by including several persons in each supporting organisation (e.g. programme officers) and in potential cooperating organisations (e.g. savings and credit cooperatives, research institutions) in the CDF training. If these stakeholders have a good understanding of farmers' capacities, the ERI approach, and participatory extension approaches in general, they can cooperate better with ERI farmer groups.

Training materials

A concise but simple facilitator's manual, compiled by HORIZONT3000, Trias, and the Ugandan company Mango Tree, consisting of 25 re-printable booklets and 17 visual tools covering the core ERI modules. The facilitator's manual (currently only in English) can be downloaded from the website (www.eri-approach.info/training-materials) and the visual tools can be purchased from Mango Tree Uganda. A further manual, including more portable formats of the visual ERI tool, is currently being developed by HORIZONT3000 and Trias.

A team of ERI trainers in East Africa can be contacted via the ERI website (www.eri-approach.info/team-of-trainers).

Further reading

Descriptions of the ERI approach, earlier and ongoing ERI projects, publications, training materials, and other information are available at www.eri-approach.info

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