

WHY ISN'T MY RESEARCH HELPING THE RURAL POOR?

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As an academic I should feel personally satisfied because I am giving lectures, training postgraduates, doing research and publishing papers. But I am not satisfied. Much of my original motivation in becoming an agricultural academic was to make the world a slightly better place by reducing the suffering of the rural poor.

I began my research on the 'soil fertility problem' in 1986. I used my academic training to analyse the situation and to explore possible strategies. I spoke to farmers, I looked at the realities of getting fertility from organic and inorganic sources, and tried to deal with the risks involved in cropping under our highly variable rainfall conditions. Personally, I was inclined towards promoting an organic strategy but the farmers wanted to move quickly into the cash economy. I decided to listen to what they were telling me and this led me to a decision that improved efficiency of inorganic fertiliser use was what farmers were looking for.

Over several years I developed an approach which involved using just enough inorganic fertiliser to obtain the maximum yield that the season allowed. My first results showed that this approach was significantly better than current fertiliser recommendations. But no one – except myself and my field staff – was impressed. I needed to do a better job of convincing the 'right' people that I had a worthy idea. I had to prove that farmers under their real life conditions could use my technical package. Thus, starting in 1993, I set about implementing the package under realistic conditions.

I had to prove that farmers under their real life conditions could use my technical package. I had to prove that, despite what everyone else thought, judicious use of moderately high rates of fertiliser was profitable and did not involve unacceptable risk.

We tried to deal with all the issues that might lead others to disbelieve that the approach was practical. We loaned farmers inputs and insisted they pay back at harvest at rates which included transport and interest. We worked with farmer groups (as opposed to individuals) to reduce the administrative costs of supply and collection. We involved an indigenous NGO to help unite the rural communities into coherent savings club groups. We worked with the local extension agents and created additional 'bicycle' extension agents from within the communities. We carried out the work over seven years – which included many different types of rainy season, and highly variable prices for fertiliser and maize grain. We worked in different parts of the country with different rainfall patterns. We moved from maize monoculture to the rotation of maize with grain legumes. We invited fertiliser companies, farmers' unions, donors, NGOs, and fellow scientists to witness the results.

We have shown donors and extension leaders our results in the field, and have heard some say how exciting it is to have something new and promising to offer the farmer. But we have also heard donors say they will not fund credit for fertiliser for farmers, and we have heard the extension service say they will promote our package only in combination with increased fertiliser availability on farm. We have heard some say the university should not be involved in development programmes, and we have heard others say we need to carry out more research, set up more sub-committees, and have more conferences.

I disagree. What we need is action that allows for the careful and thoughtful implementation of ideas that work. We (and some others) have a limited number of innovations that could make a difference to the lives of rural Zimbabweans, if only some of the 'right' people would care enough about the rural poor to help implement them.