Everyday Experts: How people’s knowledge can transform the food system

The People’s Knowledge Editorial Collective


The Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series seeks to encourage debate outside mainstream policy and conceptual frameworks on the future of food, farming, land use and human well-being. The opportunities and constraints to regenerating local food systems and economies based on social and ecological diversity, justice, human rights, inclusive democracy, and active forms of citizenship are explored in this Series. Contributors to the Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series are encouraged to reflect deeply on their ways of working and outcomes of their research, highlighting implications for policy, knowledge, organisations, and practice.

The Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series was published by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) between 2006 and 2013. The Series is now published by the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, at Coventry University.

Everyday Experts explains how knowledge built up through first-hand experience can help solve the crisis in the food system. It brings together fifty-seven activists, farmers, practitioners, researchers and community organisers from around the world to take a critical look at attempts to improve the dialogue between people whose knowledge has been marginalised in the past and others who are recognised as professional experts.

Using a combination of stories, poems, photos and videos, the contributors demonstrate how people’s knowledge can transform the food system towards greater social and environmental justice. Many of the chapters also explore the challenges of using action and participatory approaches to research.

The chapters share new insights, analysis and stories that can expand our imagination of a future that encompasses:

- making dialogue among people with different ways of understanding the world central to all decision-making
- the re-affirmation of Indigenous, local, traditional and other knowledge systems
- a blurring of the divide between professional expertise and expertise that is derived from experience
- transformed relationships amongst ourselves and with the Earth to confront inequality and the environmental crisis

To read any of the 28 chapters in this book freely available to download, please visit:

www.coventry.ac.uk/everyday-experts

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Cover photos:

(left): Field teaching by Farmer Research Team members about planting methods, Lobi area. Photo taken by C. Hickey, December 2014. Used with the permission of project participants.

(right): The Coventry Men’s Shed participatory video project exploring “What’s Eating Coventry’ and unpacks social justice issues related to food in the city of Coventry. More information at www.peoplesknowledge.org
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*Listed in alphabetical order. This book was a collective endeavour and work and responsibility was shared evenly amongst the editorial team. All chapters have been peer reviewed by a minimum of two reviewers and revised accordingly as a part of a non-blind open peer review process.
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Published by the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) at Coventry University

The Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) is driving innovative, transdisciplinary research on the understanding and development of socially just and resilient food and water systems internationally. Unique to this University Research Centre is the incorporation of citizen-generated knowledge - the participation of farmers, water users and other citizens in transdisciplinary research, using holistic approaches which cross many disciplinary boundaries among the humanities as well as the natural and social sciences.

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Professor Michel Pimbert is the coordinator and editor in chief of the Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series.

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Brokering innovation and fostering action learning – towards promoting ‘agroecological entrepreneurship’ in the new Cuban economic model

Humberto Ríos Labrada and Juan Ceballos Müller

Geographical location: Cuba

Chapter highlights: This chapter describes action research and learning intended to offer an alternative route towards an agricultural innovation system that contributes towards improved food security, sustainability and wellbeing.

The authors have been coordinating action research and learning around an innovative model based on agroecology as an alternative to conventional high-input agricultural state enterprises.

Initial stages focused on building participatory processes around production methods. In light of recent changes in Cuba, the latest stage has emphasised supporting farmers in navigating the entrepreneurial approach, supporting the emerging business ideas of small farmers.

Keywords: entrepreneurship, brokering, action research and learning, Agriculture Innovation System, agroecology.

1 The authors are based at the International Centre for development-oriented Research in Agriculture (ICRA), the Netherlands. ICRA aims to support leadership and to develop critical mass in facilitating learning and action for agricultural and rural innovation.
24.1 Introduction

Before 1959 Cuba’s history was inextricably linked to large-scale sugarcane monocropping. Many small farmers did not have access to land and were very poor.

After the triumph of the Revolution in 1959 two agrarian reforms provided land to small farmers. However, technologies generated by research institutes, experimental stations and universities in Cuba were for big agricultural state enterprises only. These were characterised by large areas of land in monoculture (between 1,000 and 100,000 hectares), with intensive mechanisation, high levels of agrochemical inputs and artificial irrigation systems. New technologies (i.e. seed varieties) were approved by a national state committee. The primary farming modality in Cuba continued to be large-scale plantations, now managed by the state.

The collapse of the socialist bloc in 1989 generated a deficit of energy, supplies and chemicals, and forced significant changes to the ways food was produced and distributed in Cuba. Due to these deficits, in the 1990s Cuba moved from being the largest consumer of agrochemicals in Latin America to become the country with the most experience of organic agriculture.

In this process of change, state enterprises gradually lost importance in the production and supply of food for local consumption, and low input family farming emerged to supply the local markets.

This transition period went hand-in-hand with a severe economic depression. The income of scientists, lecturers, technicians, government employees and the public sector in general was so low that many professionals emigrated to look for better opportunities elsewhere. Behind remained a socialist public sector uncertain how to deal with the emerging non-state farming enterprises.

In 2000, first steps were taken to strengthen family farming. A participatory seed multiplication and diffusion project started. This was a challenge for Cuban scientists who were not used to involving farmers in the decision-making process and recognising them as equal partners. This project further evolved to become the Local Agricultural Innovation Programme, or PIAL in its Spanish acronym (Programa de Innovación Agropecuaria Local). PIAL is acknowledged as one of the leading programmes in Cuba facilitating collective action in support of family farming.

This chapter describes the role of innovation brokers and of action learning in promoting seed diversity, agroecologically sound practices and participatory principles in the development of family farm enterprises in Cuba.

24.2 The first stage 2001-2007: participatory seed diffusion

In 2000 under the umbrella of the Ministry of Higher Education, a first multidisciplinary team was formed, made up of representatives of the National Institute of Agricultural Research, the Agrarian University of Havana and the Centre for Psychological and
Sociological Research. This team started organising seed diversity fairs in different districts (La Palma, San Antonio de los Baños and Batabanó) in the Western Region of Cuba. Dozens of small farmers chose plant varieties (figure 24.1) and took small samples of seeds back home to test them. Subsequently farmers started experimenting themselves and distributing validated new seeds, forming a network and giving birth to a Participatory Seed Diffusion (PSD) process. The diversity of seeds released to farmers came from the seed banks of research organisations as well as informal sources, and established an opportunity to breed new varieties through a collaborative effort between farmers and scientists.

Figure 24.1. Bean seed fair organised by a farmer called Coco, with support from La Palma district, Pinar del Rio Province. February 28, 2002. Photo: Eduardo Calves

Over the coming years the multidisciplinary research team engaged with district representatives of local non-governmental organisations such as ANAP (National Association of Small Farmers) and ACTAF (Association of Agricultural and Forestry Technicians) and with local district government staff, who gradually embraced PSD and participated in the organisation of new events (fairs). They eventually became an integral part of the process promoting PSD. The role of the team changed from being in charge to transferring ownership of the process to farmers and ‘champions’ in local public organisations, who were strongly motivated to assume this role as it increased their social recognition as a stakeholder whose voice counted. It also provided them with opportunities for international exposure and other experiences elsewhere, which encouraged them to assume leadership. Reflecting on this process, one may say that the team brokered the emergence of PSD in Cuba.
24.3 The second stage 2008-2011: expanding participatory approaches

From a process focused only on seeds, PSD expanded to encompass the dissemination of technology and techniques for different crops and other regions of Cuba in response to the demand from farmers to cover the whole spectrum of agroecological practices. This gave birth to an innovation programme that expanded all over Cuba. The programme focused on a bottom-up approach, involving farmers and key local stakeholders in the search for best agricultural practices, and became known as ‘Local Agricultural Innovation Programme’ (Programa de Innovación Agropecuaria Local, PIAL). By 2011 PIAL was covering 32 districts in all 10 provinces of the country and was using the action learning approach promoted by ICRA. This is a hands-on approach that is geared towards stimulating experiential learning (learning-by-doing) and purposeful interaction to adapt and coordinate activities, taking ‘learners’ through facilitated on-the-job learning cycles.

![Interactive learning cycles](https://www.icra-edu.org)

**Figure 24.1. Interactive learning cycles (Source: ICRA training material, [www.icra-edu.org](http://www.icra-edu.org))**

An ICRA interactive learning cycle engages all actors and stakeholders facing a common innovation challenge who stand to benefit from joint learning and action. Actors reflect on the challenges they face, learn how to deal with them, plan how to apply the lessons learnt and then apply them in their own working environment.

However, for an action learning cycle to be successful, it requires someone to bring all actors together and keep them focused on the direction that has been jointly agreed. PIAL identified ‘champions’ who had excelled in the previous years and with the support of ICRA trained them on-the-job as innovation brokers or facilitators.

In the four years of this second stage, three learning cycles took place, each taking a two-track interactive and experiential learning approach where the ‘champions identified from different organisations at district and provincial level (university lecturers, researchers, technicians and even farmers) were trained on the job as
innovation facilitators/brokers, facilitating a learning cycle with a group of actors and stakeholders coming together to address a specific challenge.

Figure 24.2 shows an example of a learning cycle implemented in Manatí district in Las Tunas Province, focusing on options to locally produce feed for pigs. The ‘champions’ guided the interaction and exchange between key stakeholders over a period of six months, taking a learning group through successive moments of reflection/planning (residential workshops) and action (field work) leading to farmers determining themselves the most appropriate feed for their pig production.

The ‘champions’ learnt on the job how to facilitate learning groups, and the learning groups learnt jointly to address a problem and search for solutions, with organisational stakeholders recognising farmers as equal partners in the search for solutions.

The facilitated action learning cycles provided evidence that the joint interaction of key stakeholders led to the transformation of knowledge from different sources (i.e. tacit, scientific, political and Indigenous) to come up with new solutions such as different local concentration formulations to feed pigs, or integration of new crops into the farming systems.

Figure 24.2. Learning cycle to promote adoption of agroecological practices in Manatí district, Las Tunas Province
24.4 The third stage 2012-2015: incorporating an entrepreneurial perspective

In the preceding years the learning cycles facilitated by local staff involved in PIAL had focussed on good agricultural practices and on increasing production and productivity. However, it became clear that the work of PIAL was not sustainable without international donor support.

Taking advantage of the fact that by then the Cuban government had started allowing people to work for themselves (por cuenta propia), PIAL started looking into alternatives to make farming more sustainable and economically viable. Using a business approach to development, again learning groups with key local actors were formed and farmers selected to join these groups. In previous years they had proved to be quite business-minded, and jointly they started identifying business ideas and testing them in the field (Figure 24.3). Between March 2014 and January 2015 thirteen business ideas were brought forward, analysed and validated, using the CANVAS business model.  

Field work:
Organising learning group with key local actors and stakeholders to identify business ideas (demand driven)

Field work:
Learning group utilises Canvas Business Model to concretise business idea

Field work:
Learning group validates business model and analyses funding opportunities

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The thirteen business models developed with farmers, processors, people interested in rural tourism and restaurant owners, were discussed on-farm and also presented at the last workshop of the learning cycle, providing an opportunity for exchange and for learning from each other.

Farmers do not have much access to agrochemical inputs in Cuba and are mostly agroecological-oriented. As a result, it was natural to emphasise this and start referring to ‘green’ farmers in the process of turning farming into a business.

Farmers and other participants in the learning cycle were extremely motivated by the newly introduced entrepreneurial perspective and eager to follow the CANVAS model, visualising their value proposition, clients, commercialisation channels, strategy to keep relationships with clients, business partners and investments. In short, farmers could think and act as small business people, even using the PIAL logo as a market brand for their local products.

24.5 Concluding remarks

Forming brokers, who themselves formed learning groups (two-track approach), was a successful process in generating innovations for local agricultural systems. Many local ‘champions’ became catalysts of innovation, who learnt to link different public stakeholders and farmers in a collective effort to introduce changes at local level.

The bottom-up approach was important, starting at local (district) level and gradually extending the learning groups to include other actors at provincial and even national level. One major success factor was that learning groups focused on real challenges farmers were facing, and the facilitators got the groups collectively sourcing solutions. This action learning helped to achieve a common understanding among a group with diverse membership including local government (representing the state doctrine), other public organisations (also conventional in their orientation) and emerging business minded farmers. It must be remembered, however, that Cuba is a socialist country governed by a different set of rules.

Nevertheless, in the last few years, the brokerage efforts have been concentrating on incorporating an entrepreneurial perspective in farming and supporting the emerging business ideas of small farmers. A future threat for these small farmers might be competition from big agribusiness that may develop due to the newly developing relations with other countries, specifically the United States, which could bring an influx of agricultural products and agribusinesses in the future. It will be important to continue developing the farmers’ business skills and establishing a niche market.

In conclusion, after 15 years of innovation brokerage and action learning, over 50,000 farmers have been reached in all ten provinces of Cuba and are benefitting from action learning through PIAL.
In the learning groups new ‘champions’ were identified and recruited to form more learning groups and catalyse further innovation processes in their specific environments, thus multiplying the actors participating in these processes in Cuba.

### 24.6 Further reading


ICRA (ND) Strengthening Agroecological Innovation Systems. Available at: [www.fao.org/3/a-bl324e.pdf](http://www.fao.org/3/a-bl324e.pdf)