

Making agricultural research for development work in remote Vietnam

Huu Nhuan Nguyen

Agricultural research for development (AR4D) that uses participatory communication strategies targeting the immediate use of research outputs for development purposes could make a change in people's lives in culturally diverse regions.

Participatory communication is an interactive or two-way communication approach in which various participatory techniques and tools are employed to maximise the engagement of stakeholders in a decision-making process, empower those stakeholders and minimise risks, all in pursuit of positive change. According to Mefalopulos (2008: 25), participatory communication is a two-way communication model that aims to achieve “mutual understanding, building trust, and uncovering and generating knowledge, leading to better results”.

Van de Fliert (2010: 98) says that facilitating participation is not about “making others participate” in the development process. Rather, it is about “engaging stakeholders in dialogue”. She argues that the facilitation of participatory communication processes, therefore, involves “‘enhancing voice’, hence power, to all parties involved” in development activities.

While participatory communication aims to support the active involvement of people in a development process, in reality, different levels of participation are achieved. Various efforts have been made to classify those levels of participation, those most commonly defined are passive participation, consultation, collaboration and empower-

ment (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009: 6).

Shifting to a “people centred” model, recent AR4D initiatives have changed from using a top-down approach to using a bottom-up approach, and from defined project outputs to a livelihoods focus. Both the sustainable livelihoods and participatory communication approaches have been critically discussed by development actors in the context of efforts to facilitate AR4D interventions to achieve both short-term outputs and long-term multiple impacts.

The sustainable livelihood approach is utilised as a visualisation tool that provides an analytical structure for a broad and systematic understanding of the wide range of impacts that AR4D projects could have on people's lives. In contrast, participatory communication is seen as a core factor in the facilitation of the research process.

Participatory communication is believed to enhance the participation of local people in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of AR4D, leading to changes in people's knowledge, skills and behaviours. These changes facilitate the better use of research outputs towards achieving livelihood impacts such as human, social, economic, physical and natural impacts.

Using participatory communication not only requires suitable methods but also requires good facilitation capabilities and appropriate attitudes among the facilitators who are working with local communities, especially ethnic minority people. The contribution of the participatory communication strategies underpinning AR4D towards social change and development in target communities is illustrated in Figure 1.

Top-down agricultural research in Vietnam's Northwest Highlands

The Northwest Highlands of Vietnam are not only characterised by high ethnic diversity and typical topographic conditions, but also by a high rate of poverty. Since the late 1990s, various agricultural research projects including AR4D projects have been conducted by both national research institutions and international development agencies for the economic development of the region.

Participatory communication strategies aiming

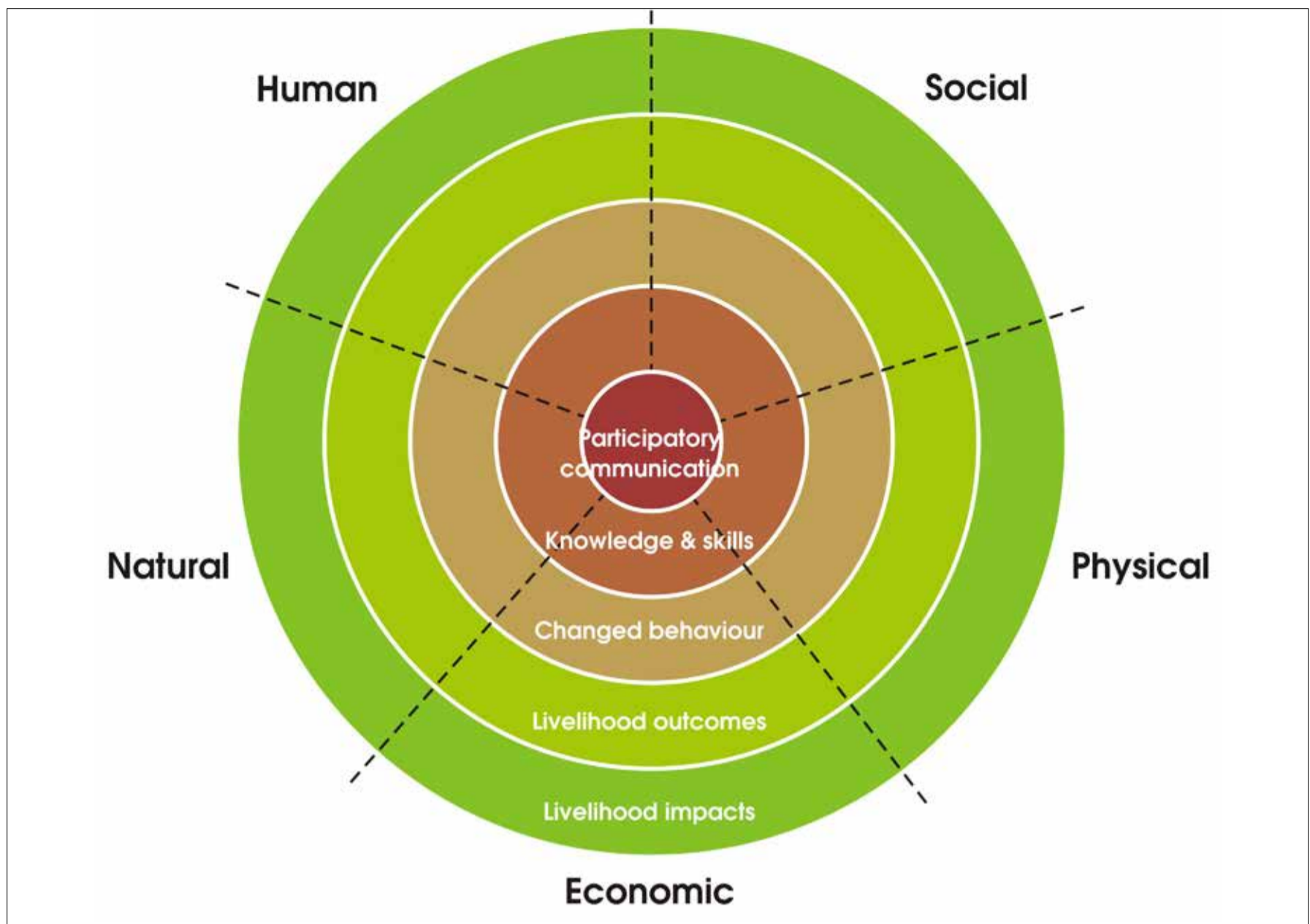


Figure 1: Participatory communication and sustainable livelihood development (adapted from Van de Fliert et al. 2010).

at the immediate use of research outputs for development purposes have been adopted by several AR4D initiatives since the late 2000s. However, the use of top-down communication with poor feedback mechanisms still seems dominant in most agricultural research in the highlands, leading to low levels of empowerment of local communities and limited potential to scale-out the research outputs (Nguyen et al., 2015).

Most agricultural research projects in the highlands are externally designed and implemented by research institutes and universities. Local stakeholders are passive in the identification of research problems and research project implementation as well as in the monitoring and evaluation of research activities. Farmers are involved in most agricultural research projects as labour, farm providers and information givers rather than as co-researchers. Local extension staff participates

in some activities in the planning and evaluation phases; however, decisions are mainly made by external researchers.

The impact assessment results of agricultural research projects are often not shared with local stakeholders when the project is completed. Consequently, local farmers, extension staff and researchers all have limited understanding about the impacts of agricultural research as well as low capacity to sustain the impacts for development. In addition, the communication strategies currently utilised in agricultural research give little consideration to the problem of overcoming language barriers when working with ethnic minorities.

For example, training handouts, and research results are often written in the Vietnamese language, which a large number of local ethnic minority people cannot read. As a result, they don't benefit as much from extension activities as the

majority whose first language is Vietnamese. The use of visual extension materials by local extension networks is very limited. These issues lead to inefficient dissemination and use of technological information and innovations.

Participatory communication in AR4D in remote and culturally diverse regions

Several agricultural research projects claim to apply a participatory approach. However, top-down planning and implementation approaches are used in most research projects (especially in government-funded projects), leading to low levels of empowerment of local communities. Agricultural researchers and local stakeholders also have different understandings about the meaning of participation in research processes and in the impact assessment of AR4D projects.

Why and how would AR4D projects benefit from participatory communication within a socio-economic context like the Northwest Highlands of Vietnam? To answer this question, attention should be paid not only to how participatory communication could help AR4D to achieve objectives but also to how it could help empower people towards sustainable livelihoods development. There are several major reasons for utilising participatory communication strategies for AR4D projects in this diverse region.

At the design stage, participatory communication helps to assess the real needs of local communities. The isolated region is home to many ethnic groups such as Dao, H'Mong and Thai people, so the implementation of AR4D projects faces problems such as language barriers, low education of local people and limited livelihood resources. Using participatory communication techniques could help to facilitate the active involvement of local people in defining research priorities.

For example, in the recent ACIAR Northwest Project,¹ various participatory techniques such as focus group discussion, participatory mapping, transect walk, participatory photo stories and seasonal calendar were conducted with communities at local village level in participatory diagnostic studies in the early phase of the research. Local village leaders and extension staff also par-

ticipated in the diagnostic studies. This not only helped to gain in-depth understanding of the local socio-economic and agro-ecological conditions, constraints and research opportunities for the target communities but also helped to build partnerships between the researchers and local stakeholders, especially farmers.

In the technology development and extension phase, participatory communication can be utilised to involve farmers as co-researchers and to involve local extension staff as research partners in a research process. Regular on-farm meetings and participatory planning and implementation of field trials help to create the enabling environments for farmers and researchers to discuss the research progress, identify emerging issues and make adjustments to the research activities.

A participatory monitoring and evaluation system, which is adaptable to the specific social economic contexts of target communities, can make AR4D interventions more applicable to complex local social conditions. Comprehensive participatory monitoring and evaluation schemes could help research interventions to fill gaps in languages and culture as well as in local people's perceptions and knowledge about their existing problems.

Farmers in the ACIAR Northwest Project, for instance, reported that the researchers worked together with them in the planning and implementation of plum and maize trials. The researchers frequently visited trial farms and met with farmers, establishing close collaboration between the researchers, local farmers and extension staff in carrying out, monitoring and evaluating the research activities and extension pilots. As a result, the capacity of farmers and local extension staff had been strengthened. The active involvement of local extension staff and authorities in the evaluation of research trials, technology pilot sites and in the final evaluation of the project helped to develop capacity for local partners and facilitate the scaling-up of the application of the research outputs.

In regard to the impact assessment of AR4D projects, the use of participatory communication strategies such as focus group discussions, in-depth interviews with key informants, direct ob-

ervation and semi-structured interviews helps to gather valuable qualitative and quantitative data about the impacts of the project. These participatory methods with the aid of various participatory techniques such as participatory resource mapping, seasonal calendars, rankings, Venn diagrams and participatory photo stories for data collection and analysis not only help to gain reliable information but also to empower local stakeholders in the impact assessment processes.

The collaboration among stakeholders such as farmers, extension staff and researchers is also strengthened. In addition, the effective communication of impact assessment findings cannot be achieved without the active involvement of local stakeholders in the impact assessment. By involving local people in impact assessment, the co-creation of knowledge about the impact can be achieved. This will lead to a shift from “outsiders’ making an announcement on the impact findings” to “all the stakeholders sharing and learning from the impact findings”. Therefore, the expectations of both the funding agencies and the local stakeholders and beneficiaries are met.

However, there is no standard participatory communication strategy for all impact assessments. Using participatory communication techniques for impact assessment requires researchers to pay careful attention to both the local social complexity and the available resources in order to develop the most applicable impact assessment strategies. The use of simple and understandable languages should also be carefully considered when communicating impact findings in line with the level of education or relevant skills of the key stakeholders. The dissemination of visual products, such as participatory videos, photo stories and posters in international conferences and seminars, agricultural extension training courses and online databases, can help to sustain impacts effectively.

Challenges for using participatory communication in AR4D

The use of participatory communication could enable AR4D to achieve better social, economic and environmental outcomes and impacts in target

communities. However, the application of participatory communication in highly diverse and complex regions, such as the Northwest Highlands in Vietnam, is challenged by the existence of a conventional top-down extension system and limited engagement capabilities of both farmers and development workers.

It should be pointed out that no standard sets of participatory communication techniques could be developed to fit different communities and locations. Constraints on time, funding and human resource allocation for each activity should be carefully considered when utilising participatory communication strategies to make AR4D work for social change and development. ■

Note

1. “Improved market engagement for sustainable upland production systems in the Northwest Highlands of Vietnam” funded by ACIAR

References

- Mefalopulos, P. (2008). *Development communication sourcebook: Broadening the boundaries of communication*. Washington, D.C: World Bank.
- Nguyen, H. N., Van de Fliert, E., & Nicetic, O. (2015). Towards a holistic framework for impact assessment of agricultural research for development – understanding complexity in remote, culturally diverse regions of Vietnam. *Australasian Agribusiness Review*, 23, 12 - 25.
- Tufte, T., & Mefalopulos, P. (2009). *Participatory Communication : A practical guide*. Washington: World Bank Publications.
- Van de Fliert, E. (2010). Participatory Communication in Rural Development: What does it take for the established order? *Extension Farming Systems Journal*, 6(1): 96-100.
- Van de Fliert, E., Vuong, P. T., Hien, D. T. M., & Thomas, P. (2010). *Narrowing gaps and building bridges: the role of participatory communication in (scoping) transdisciplinary research for sustainable development in the North West of Vietnam*. Paper presented at the IAMCR 2010: Communication and Citizenship, Braga, Portugal.

Huu Nhuan Nguyen (h.nguyen20@uq.edu.au), PhD candidate at the Centre for Communication and Social Change, The University of Queensland, Australia. He teaches at the Faculty of Economics and Rural Development, Vietnam National University of Agriculture.