

REFLECTIONS

Disentangling challenges in mainstreaming smallholder farmers' perspectives into knowledge co-creation processes: evidence from Benin

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Achieving impact at scale in the agricultural sector demands the contribution of all stakeholders for transformational changes. However, although smallholders form most agri-food value chains, actors, in developing countries, their voices and idiosyncrasies are little consulted and accounted for in policymaking. Yet, co-creation knowledge processes efforts to improve such situations are ongoing but face operational challenges, usually context-specific, that the literature fails to point out. Our reflection addresses the knowledge gap and discusses how to effectively engage smallholders in critical discussions regarding the sustainable transformation of agriculture. We showed that when discussing with smallholders about their livelihoods and economic activities, they often demonstrate poverty and misery to entice policy interventions; *falsifying responses, if necessary, is part of the strategy*. We thought that the reason justifying such a situation might be because many knowledge processes consider smallholders as passive information providers; therefore, we made a call to researchers to ensure smallholders understand the research purpose and contribution to policymaking. However, there is still a risk of information falsification in the other way around, bringing to the attention that there is no easy solution. We, therefore, suggest that researchers be cognizant of the risk and deal with it in two possible ways: using indirect objective questions in place of direct subjective questions and triangulating information.

Keywords: Knowledge integration; knowledge co-creation; knowledge management; agribusiness; smallholders; farmers; private sector; evidence-informed policymaking; sustainable development goals; agricultural development; Benin

It is now evident in the literature that smallholder farmers, herein referred to as smallholders are real entrepreneurs. We have empirical proofs from research among inland fishers (Sonneveld et al, 2019) and urban gardeners (Houessou et al, 2019) that smallholder farmers have good

managerial capacities to succeed in agribusiness: they take risks by launching new ventures, they can hire and pay temporary and permanent workers, manage the purchase of inputs and sale of products, make profits from their activities, and develop resilient attitudes in the face of challenges and shocks. As such, they can fully be considered as microentrepreneurs and, therefore, actors of the *for-profit* private sector.

Mainstreaming the perspectives of smallholders into agricultural policies and programs have become a must for sustainable development. In developing countries where smallholders form most agri-food value chain actors, it is critical to account for their idiosyncrasies to make them a significant player in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goal 2: Zero Hunger. However, the voice of smallholders is still marginalized and even when efforts are made to include and work with them, integrating their perspectives is difficult. While such difficulties are, for the most, context-specific, operational challenges for co-creating knowledge with smallholders to inform agricultural policies and programs are under-documented. Thus, there is little evidence on how to effectively engage smallholders in critical discussions regarding the sustainable transformation of agriculture. This reflection aims to address the knowledge gap by reflecting on the operational challenges faced when engaging smallholders in co-creating knowledge to inform policy interventions.

Our contribution learnt from extensive collaboration with urban gardeners to co-create knowledge that would help formulate evidence-informed solutions on how to support the development of urban agriculture in Benin. In our study, we adopted a transdisciplinary approach to urban agriculture in Benin (Houessou et al, 2019) and actively involved the perspective of urban gardeners in formulating policy recommendations. Therefore, we held several discussions (individual interviews and focus groups) on relevant options that fitted in their needs and constraints. A focus group discussion was organized with twenty men and women urban gardeners and two experts from the Ministry of Agriculture, Benin, to discuss findings of a study on the benefits of gardening, including profitability and organization. A first finding shared to gardeners was that loans are insufficient, and related conditions are unsuitable for urban gardeners. They confirmed that loans granted to them do not cover their financing needs and conditions attached to the loans do not fit the gardening activities (no grace period, no possibility of deferment, high-interest rates, and short repayment period). They also added that the reluctance of many financial institutions to provide loans to gardeners is a constraint for financing their activities. Though the contribution of smallholders was informative on this finding, feedback on another finding was not as positive as the former one. The research team also shared that urban gardening is profitable and can help gardeners cover their basic needs and improve food security. Reactions, after sharing that result, were in a first attempt negative in the

sense that they disagreed with the finding. The reason given to justify such reactions was that they do not make enough money from gardening and cannot consider themselves as well-off people who do not need support. Thus, in their *perception*, indicating that urban gardening is a profitable activity, is a bottleneck for obtaining support from the government or other actors.

As researchers, we were aware of such reactions and thereby *possible falsification* from smallholders and explained anew the purpose of our discussions which was to understand the benefits of urban gardening to making informed recommendations to policymakers on how best they can support urban agriculture. As we mentioned that the research findings could lead to support from policymakers, the group of gardeners changed their initial feedback and confirmed the profitability of their business. They highlighted that urban gardening allows them to cover their basic needs, and then corroborated their response with additional examples. A strong argument provided to support the finding was that they would have already abandoned the gardening if it were not profitable. They also added that some gardeners had quit their side jobs to allocate more time to gardening, an excellent proof of the profitability of the activity.

The above-described story shows that smallholders often tend to understate the profitability of their activities to portray a necessity condition hoping that it will trigger more support towards them. Not only, this indigenous perception is *wrong*, but it may also lead smallholders to suggest *inadequate* recommendations that would have adverse effects on their activities in the long term. There is evidence that convincing decision-makers to support urban agriculture depends on how they are convinced about the profitability of the sub-sector. For example, we recently conducted a review on factors that are constraining the expansion of urban agriculture and found that the benefits of investing in urban agriculture are still unperceived by the government; corroborated by the fact that the government of Benin makes huge investments in cotton and cashew value chains because they are convinced about the potential of these products on the livelihoods of farmers and the economy. Therefore, increasing political priority is likely if gardeners could demonstrate the positive impact of urban gardening on their lives; *not the contrary as they intended to do*.

As we reflect on the reasons for such behavior from smallholders, the main explaining factor is how researchers involve smallholders in processes of knowledge co-creation. In many processes, smallholders play the role of *information providers* as respondents to questionnaires or “passive” participants in interviews. They know little about the research objectives, its approaches, and the analytical framework. It is largely argued and recommended that smallholders are “fully integrated” into research processes, but in practice, this is not easy. In the story described above, if the urban gardeners had a deep understanding of the research objectives and how the research

interpreted findings, they might be more comfortable about discussing the profitability of their businesses. Therefore, we make a call to researchers working to involve smallholders in knowledge co-creation to ensure smallholders understand what information is essential and how it will be interpreted in terms of policy recommendations.

However, there is a *risk*. By ensuring that smallholders fully understand the research objective and contribution to policymaking, there is a risk that they also provide *falsified* information that would trigger support from policymakers. Thus, be aware and deal with that risk is the solution, and researchers should be cognizant that there is no easy way. Nonetheless, we foresee two options to address the risk. First, researchers may make use of indirect objective questions in place of direct subjective questions. For example, during discussions with smallholders, questions such as “is your business or activity profitable?” could be replaced by more indirect questions about associated benefits such as ‘details of what is purchased or accomplished with generated income?’. Then, gathering accomplishments during the discussions would easily bring in what the conclusion is, regarding the business profitability. Second, there is information triangulation. Triangulation is a verification technique that uses more than one method to collect data on the same topic and assure the validity of the research.

To sum up, this reflection piece has shown that when discussing with smallholders about their livelihoods and economic activities, they often tend to demonstrate poverty and misery to entice policy interventions, and they may falsify information if needed. We, therefore, advocate that researchers consider the risk of falsification and continue to fully mainstream smallholders in knowledge co-creating processes; of course, making them aware of the research purpose and contribution to policymaking is a must to make informed recommendations for impact at scale.

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