Research-in-development assessment guides:
Introduction to identifying action research questions
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Summary and purpose

Action research with smallholder farmers and herders is challenging to conduct, including under research-in-development approaches, in which research is performed in collaboration with development projects and programs. One of the best ways to face such a challenge is to be well prepared, by identifying useful initial questions to begin the action research process. The guides this document accompanies are designed to assess potentially 'researchable' questions focused on key knowledge gaps facing our development partners, and the farmers and herders who benefit from their programs. The specific goals of these research assessment guides are to:

- characterize options being implemented by development programs, and by farmers and herders themselves, and gather information on the general success of those options,

- broadly characterize contextual factors that are likely to affect the success of these options,

- assess possibilities for adaptation of ideas from other systems or places in the local context,

- assess possibilities for augmentation of options already being implemented, and

- identify whether perspectives on the above issues differ among stakeholder groups, potentially leading to more synthetic or particularly novel research questions.

Once an assessment has been conducted, specific research priorities will emerge from the analysis of the assessment outputs. Research protocols addressing the most pressing research questions can then be developed and presented to stakeholders for critique and improvement, after which the action research process can be initiated.

About the guides

Several research-in-development assessment guides were produced, and were then subsequently vetted via application in multiple field sites to ensure their fitness for purpose. The final versions of the research assessment guides that this document accompanies can be applied in systems similar to those they were created for, or adapted for other systems. The versions produced thus far are designed primarily to rapidly assess priority areas of research for Ethiopian highland mixed farming systems and pastoral and agro-pastoral production systems. The guides were designed to capture the perspectives of (*i*) communities and community institutions, with institutions including, for example, user groups for grazing exclosures and forest management, rangeland management committees, and leadership of traditional institutions, and (*ii*) experts, including officers and implementing staff of development projects and programs, district government officers, and locally-based development agents. The current set of research assessment guides consists of the following:

- Ethiopian highland grazing exclosure, for communities and community institutions

- Ethiopian highland grazing exclosure, for experts

- Ethiopian highland croplands, for communities and community institutions

- Ethiopian highland croplands, for experts

- Pastoral areas, for communities and community institutions

- Pastoral areas, for experts

Application steps

1. *Review available information.* The primary academic literature, grey literature, and the experiences of development implementers should be used to clarify priority areas of research. The guides this document accompanies were designed to address land restoration research priorities identified during such a review, and most of these priorities focus on restoring communal lands, which has significantly determined the design of the

assessment guides. For other research gaps not covered by these guides, the guides would need to be adapted, or new guides produced. Where these guides sufficiently address the research priorities to be assessed, they can be used in their current form.

2. *Involve all relevant stakeholders in the area*. A key aspect of research-in-development approaches is the use partnerships between researchers, development projects and programs, and farmers and herders to conduct research on implementable options, as implementation of the project or program proceeds. The development partners of researchers should be consulted at the beginning of the research assessment process, and the research must necessarily be aligned with the broad goals of the development partner. The development partners will also be central respondents during the research assessment process itself. The most important step is to bring the perspectives of communities and community institutions to bear heavily on the identification of research needs. From the first time a community is visited or a meeting held with a community institution, the relationship between researchers and the community begins to be formed, and will largely determine the success of action research. Finally, it is important to assess the perspectives of government experts in the area of the action research site, ensuring research compliance with regulations, and providing an additional layer of independent information for cross-checking and validating the other responses.

3. *Hold interviews and focus group discussions*. The guides presented here can be used either in interviews with one or a few respondents, or in focus group discussions with larger numbers of respondents. During the testing and vetting of the assessment guides, interviews were used with experts, and focus group discussions were used with mixed groups of community members and representatives of community institutions. Interviews with experts required approximately 1–1.5 hours, while community focus group discussions took 2–3 hours, or sometimes longer. As the assessment proceeds, be particularly aware of disagreements or differences between stakeholder groups. Where incongruities are spotted, they should be followed up to cross-check responses, to determine constraints that could be alleviated, and to identify opportunities for bringing divergent perspectives together to yield more discerning research questions. To maximize the information gathered, fully document relevant responses to each question. Avoid 'leading' translations of questions, and should a response appear to be the result of its phrasing, try a different way of translating the question or asking the same question in an indirect manner. When persistently re-phrasing a question still fails to obtain an adequate or meaningful response, indicate 'no response' for that question. More productive discussions are produced under the careful guidance of a skilled and trained facilitator, well-versed in the dialect, agricultural systems, and institutional contexts in the specific research location.

4. *Analyze and report*. The assessment guides presented here yield largely qualitative information, and all responses from all communities in a research site should be compiled together in list form under each question. Similarly, all responses from all experts should be compiled together. Following compilation, the results for communities and experts can be contrasted more easily with one another. In the pastoral assessment guides, some questions produce ordinal rankings, e.g., for ranking the influence of various stakeholders on the management of communal rangelands. If collected in several sites, the rankings can be calculated for communities, for experts, and then compared among communities and experts. When reporting back to the development partner on the research priorities emerging from the analysis, the results of the assessment analysis should be used to provide justification for the prioritization of areas of research, and specific research questions and protocols addressing the most pressing of research priorities.