



## Lapses, infidelities, and creative adaptations: Lessons from evaluation of a participatory market development approach in the Andes

Douglas Horton <sup>a,\*</sup>, Emma Rotondo <sup>b</sup>, Rodrigo Paz Ybarnegaray <sup>c</sup>, Guy Hareau <sup>d</sup>, André Devaux <sup>e</sup>, Graham Thiele <sup>f</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Independent Consultant, USA

<sup>b</sup> PREVAL Network in Latin America, Peru

<sup>c</sup> Independent Consultant, Bolivia

<sup>d</sup> International Potato Center, Peru

<sup>e</sup> International Potato Center, Ecuador

<sup>f</sup> CGIAR Research Program on Roots, Tubers and Bananas, Peru



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### ABSTRACT

Participatory approaches are frequently recommended for international development programs, but few have been evaluated. From 2007 to 2010 the *Andean Change Alliance* evaluated an agricultural research and development approach known as the “Participatory Market Chain Approach” (PMCA). Based on a study of four cases, this paper examines the fidelity of implementation, the factors that influenced implementation and results, and the PMCA change model. We identify three types of deviation from the intervention protocol (lapses, creative adaptations, and true infidelities) and five groups of variables that influenced PMCA implementation and results (attributes of the macro context, the market chain, the key actors, rules in use, and the capacity development strategy). There was insufficient information to test the validity of the PMCA change model, but results were greatest where the PMCA was implemented with highest fidelity. Our analysis suggests that the single most critical component of the PMCA is engagement of market agents – not just farmers – throughout the exercise. We present four lessons for planning and evaluating participatory approaches related to the use of action and change models, the importance of monitoring implementation fidelity, the limits of baseline survey data for outcome evaluation, and the importance of capacity development for implementers.

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### 1. Introduction

Participatory approaches are often recommended to improve the efficiency and sustainability of international development programs or to contribute to local capacity development and empowerment (Chambers, 2010; World Bank, 1996). Participatory approaches have a long history in agricultural research and development (R&D), beginning with cropping and farming systems research in the 1970s and evolving to a broad array of participatory approaches for rural assessment, plant breeding, natural resource

management, and market chain development (Devaux et al., 2009; Collinson, 2000; Scoones & Thompson, 2009). Despite the extensive interest in and experimentation with participatory approaches over nearly a half-century, few of these approaches have been systematically evaluated and there is little evidence of their effectiveness and benefits (Johnson, Lilja, & Ashby, 2003: 288; Martin, 2009: 276).

Evaluators of participatory approaches have grappled with numerous challenges, including the broad range of expected project impacts, the large number of stakeholders with often differing interests, and the limited direct influence of evaluation results on funding decisions (Lilja & Dixon, 2008a, 2008b). In this paper, we address three even more fundamental methodological challenges to the evaluation of participatory approaches: the commonly imprecise definition of the approaches themselves; frequent adaptation of the approaches by local implementers; and the long, complex and little-understood pathways

Abbreviations: PMCA, Participatory Market Change Approach; R&D, research and development; NGO, non-governmental organization.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 941 351 1562.

E-mail addresses: [d.horton@mac.com](mailto:d.horton@mac.com) (D. Horton), [rotondoemma@yahoo.com.ar](mailto:rotondoemma@yahoo.com.ar) (E. Rotondo), [rodrigopaz71@hotmail.com](mailto:rodrigopaz71@hotmail.com) (R. Paz Ybarnegaray), [g.hareau@cgiar.org](mailto:g.hareau@cgiar.org) (G. Hareau), [a.devaux@cgiar.org](mailto:a.devaux@cgiar.org) (A. Devaux), [g.thiele@cgiar.org](mailto:g.thiele@cgiar.org) (G. Thiele).

through which participatory approaches contribute to such development goals as food security, rural livelihoods, and environmental sustainability.

From 2007 to 2010, the *Andean Change Alliance*<sup>1</sup> evaluated four participatory approaches to agricultural R&D (Horton et al., 2011; Thiele et al., 2011b). Teams in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru implemented the approaches with support from specialists based in two international agricultural research centers.<sup>2</sup> A separate team (the authors of this paper) evaluated the implementation and results of the approaches. And a third team was tasked with using the evidence generated through evaluations for advocacy to promote more inclusive agricultural innovation systems.<sup>3</sup> One of the approaches evaluated was the Participatory Market Change Approach (PMCA), developed by the International Potato Center and its Papa Andina partnership program (<http://www.papandina.org>). The PMCA engages smallholder farmers, market agents and agricultural service providers in a facilitated process that builds trust among these diverse groups and promotes collective action, which in turn leads to innovations that benefit smallholders as well as other chain actors.

In this paper, we seek to advance thinking and practice in the planning, management, and evaluation of programs that involve participatory approaches, by reflecting on three aspects of the Alliance's evaluation work with the PMCA: (1) assessment of the fidelity of implementation; (2) identification of key factors that influence implementation and results; and (3) assessment of the change model underlying the approach. We formulate lessons for improving future programs that employ the PMCA or other similar participatory approaches.

In Section 2, we identify two contrasting perspectives found in the evaluation and innovation literatures on the importance of high fidelity of implementation versus the need for adaptation of interventions to fit local circumstances. In Section 3, we describe the concepts and methods used in our study. Section 4 describes the main features of the PMCA and Section 5 reports on four applications of the approach in Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru. Section 6 discusses the case-study results in relation to issues of fidelity of implementation, factors that influence implementation and results, and the PMCA change model. Section 7 presents lessons for improving the planning, management, and evaluation of future programs involving participatory approaches such as the PMCA. The final section presents general conclusions.

## 2. Perspectives on fidelity and adaptation

One of the fundamental questions that drives evaluation is "Does an intervention work? ... in the end we want to know whether a program did work, is working, or can work" (Century, Rudnick, & Freeman, 2010: 199). Answering these deceptively

simple questions leads us to more fundamental questions such as: "What is the intervention"? "How should the intervention be implemented"? and "How is the intervention expected to contribute to the intended results"? The first two questions relate to what Chen (2005) calls the intervention's "action model" – a systematic plan for organizing resources, staff, and relationships in order to deliver the intervention faithfully. The third question relates to what Chen calls the "change model" – a broader conceptual framework that links the intervention's activities and outputs to the expected outcomes and impacts and explains how and why the intervention is expected to lead to the desired changes.

The term "fidelity of implementation" refers to the extent to which a program's implementation is consistent with its action model. Researchers and evaluators have proposed frameworks for assessing fidelity of implementation based on such dimensions as adherence to protocol, exposure to services, quality of delivery, participant responsiveness. Other frameworks for measuring fidelity are based on critical components of the intervention. Structural components relate to how the intervention is structured, the people and resources it mobilizes, and the tasks carried out. Process components relate to the principles and values underlying the intervention, the ways in which it is implemented, the skills, roles and behaviors of the individuals involved in implementation, and the interactions among individuals and organizations (Zvoch, 2012). Based on the notion of critical components, Century et al. (2010: 202) define fidelity of implementation as "the extent to which the critical components of an intended program are present when the program is enacted," and propose a framework for assessing the fidelity of implementation built around structural and process components.

Implementation evaluations generally focus on relatively easy-to-measure structural components. However, complex process components may have a greater influence on program outcomes (Bisset, Daniel, & Potvin, 2009). We assess the fidelity of PMCA implementation using a framework with both structural and process components. We identify three main reasons why implementers deviated from the initial design of the PMCA, and discuss the implications for planning and managing programs that employ participatory approaches.

Publications on fidelity of implementation often stress the value of high fidelity and give the impression that infidelity is bad. This is because most the fidelity literature is concerned with the measurement of intervention treatment effects. As Bierman (2006: 88–90) points out, interventions may fail due to problems with the action model, the change model, or the fidelity of implementation. If an intervention is not implemented according to plan, estimated treatment effects may be biased or misleading. Therefore, evaluators seeking to measure the validity of action or change models stress the importance of high implementation fidelity.

In contrast, studies concerned with innovation and the dissemination of new practices emphasize the positive aspects of adapting program procedures to fit local circumstances. Bierman (2006) highlights the need to balance tension between "research-based fidelity versus input and program adaptations offered by community members and local service providers." Ashley (2009: 37) notes that, "diffusion theory anticipates modifications to interventions and purports that adaptability of the intervention to fit the context is critical to its adoption and maintenance over time." Patton (2011) argues that interventions that address complex social issues need to evolve and continuously adapt themselves to changing circumstances. Consequently, local teams should not be expected to implement intervention protocols mechanically but should be encouraged to adapt interventions to achieve the best local results.

<sup>1</sup> The Andean Change Alliance (Alianza Cambio Andino) was established to contribute to sustainable livelihoods in poor communities by improving their participation in innovation processes (<http://www.cambioandino.org>). Funding and resources for the Alliance were provided by the United Kingdom Government's Department for International Development (DFID) and by participating organizations.

<sup>2</sup> The two international centers were the International Potato Center (CIP) and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) (<http://www.cgiar.org/cgari-consortium/research-centers>). Regional and national partners included: Programa para el Fortalecimiento de los Sistemas Gubernamentales de Seguimiento y Evaluación de Proyectos y Programas de Desarrollo Rural en América Latina y el Caribe (PREVAL); Asociación Colombiana de Organizaciones no Gubernamentales para la Comunicación Vía Correo Electrónico (COLNODO); Corporación para el Desarrollo Participativo y Sostenible de los Pequeños Agricultores, (PBA Foundation, Colombia); Fundación para la Promoción e Investigación de Productos Andinos (PROINPA, Bolivia); and Instituto de Estudios Sociales y Económicos, Universidad Mayor de San Simón (IESE, Bolivia). The Alliance's work with the PMCA was implemented with Papa Andina (<http://www.cipotato.org/wordpress>).

<sup>3</sup> The importance of participatory approaches in agricultural innovation systems is noted in World Bank (2012).

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