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Learning to respect local knowledge, the hard way!

by Sarah Appiah, Ghana

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of **Stories
Change**

*Connecting traditional knowledge and
innovations for fair and sustainable
food systems*

United Nations
Decade of
**FAMILY
FARMING**
2019-2028





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Stories of change: *Connecting traditional knowledge and innovations for fair and sustainable food systems*

In December 2017, the [United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the United Nations Decade of Family Farming \(UNDAF, 2019-2028\)](#) thus constituting a framework that recognizes the importance of family farmers, which includes peasants, indigenous people, traditional communities, pastoralists, fisherfolks, upland farmers, and many other groups of food producers that possess a unique potential to promote transformative changes in the way food is grown, produced, processed and distributed.

All over the world, there are thousands of stories of distinctive work carried out anonymously by family farmers, including women and youth, on successful transitions to more inclusive, sustainable and fair food systems. Those stories are based on co-creation and sharing of traditional knowledge and innovations that are helping to make food systems sustainable, leaving no one behind.

In this context, the [Family Farming Knowledge Platform](#) in collaboration with the [Barefoot Guide Connection](#) organized a series of “writeshops”, writing classes to support practitioners to write their own experience, generating knowledge which highlight the practices, changes, innovations and impacts of what they do in support of family farming.

These writeshops represented an opportunity to share the creative process through which identify, recognize, write and exchange stories and experiences from young people, women, farmers, small-scale producers who work to promote, improve and strengthen family farming and achieve prosperous and inclusive rural societies.

This initiative was conceived to provide a space to highlight the human, cultural and social dimensions of family farming, including the human rights embedded in family farming and its social and economic organization.

The stories presented in this compilation - selected among those written during the writeshops, highlight the different ways in which family farmers responsibly and creatively manage their natural resources, landscapes and ecosystems as well as the cultural and symbolic values that define their identity.

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Learning to respect local knowledge, the hard way!

by Sarah Appiah, Ghana

It was a sunny Saturday morning, full of life and energy as we arrived in one of the beautiful and serene farming communities in the hinterlands. Whilst one could easily be put off by the roughness of the roads to the community, the freshness of the air in such forest zones becomes soothing to the soul and one could unconsciously forget the toil of such travel. I must emphasize that joining a team of researchers for a stakeholder dialogue in that community, on one of the controversial questions that had remained unanswered in my mind, was a joy and I arrived full of anticipation. I was intrigued about why local farmers will shun an idea or new farming practice that could reduce the cost of farming and perhaps increase the yield. I kept asking myself: "Why would they be so convinced about their traditional way of doing things? Are they getting any better results, or are there better options they know of?"

Mr. Agyekum, the district extension officer, began to lead a discussion on the topic among local farmers in Badukrom, a small farming community in the Ahafo Region of Ghana. The discussion started in small groups, on the question: "Why do local farmers fail to adopt new farming practices?" The participants of the meeting included cocoa farmers, vegetable growers, community level extension officers and the research team. As I move around with a few others to monitor and note the responses

from the groups, it was illuminating hearing the responses of these local folks.

Prior to this meeting, a project was launched in the area that aimed to reduce inorganic fertilizer usage among cocoa farmers by introducing no or low-cost organic fertilizers to farmers. The program aimed to improve good farming practices, improve yields and more importantly to reduce the cost of farming for these farmers. Trained community agriculture extension officers organized both off-farm and on-farm practical trainings to educate the local farmers on the new farming practices. From the initial feasibility report, they had seemed to support the idea. What then could have caused their disconnect, I wondered?

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As the discussions went on, we realized from their responses that the project did not take into consideration the premium local farmers place on traditional and social knowledge they have learnt overtime from their elders and colleagues with regards to fertilizer application. Culturally, certain brands of inorganic fertilizers have been branded as gold standards among farmers in the area. And these peer group

knowledge/ practices appeared stronger than the scientific knowledge or new practice they cannot testify to. Others had knowledge of other traditional means of fertilizer application and pest control, such as the use of the neem tree leaves and the likes that were not mentioned as part of the new practice. Citing examples of how this traditional knowledge has worked for some of them over the years, they appeared to suggest they know of better options traditionally that may work better on their farms than what they were introduced to. This may not necessarily be so, I thought, but one could now see the missing link. We have to respect their knowledge if we want them to own and adopt the new ideas.

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Then I began to listen to the responses more critically. The cultural and other socio-economic factors, indigenous knowledge among others had a huge role to play in the process of adoption irrespective of how good or resounding a modern practice is. There we realized the context and the culture of the people is everything! And these perhaps explain why intervention projects worth millions of dollars have become white elephants in Africa.

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